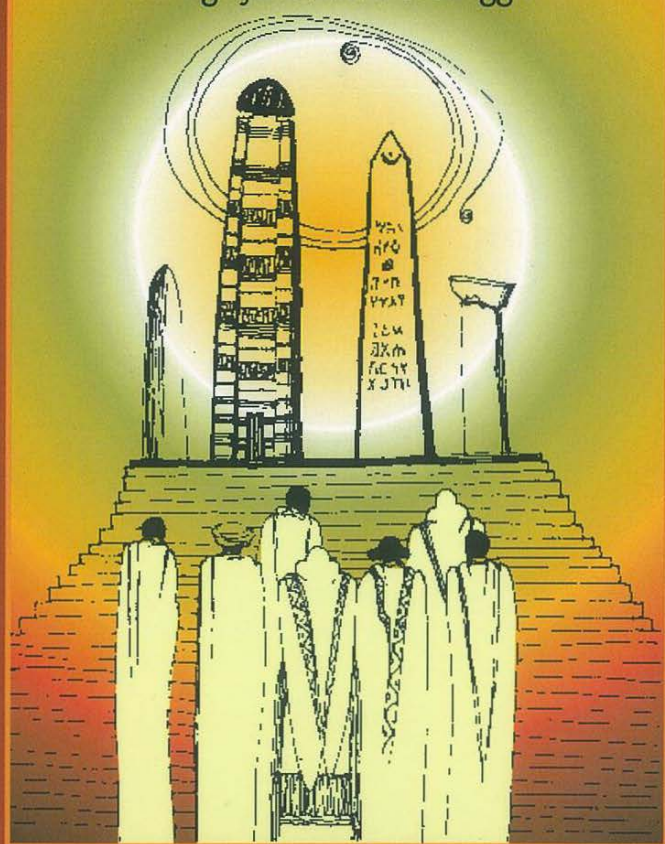


IDENTITY JILTED

OR

RE-IMAGINING IDENTITY?

The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean
and Tigrayan Nationalist Struggles



ALEMSEGED ABBAY





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CALENDAR

Ethiopian Calendar

Meskerem 1 [New Year], 1990

Tiqemt/Teqemti

Hedar

Tahsas (Tahsas 23, 1990)

Tir/Tiri

Yekatit/Lekatit

Megabit

Miazia

Genbot

Sene

Hamle

Nehase

Pagumen 5

Gregorian Calendar

September 11, 1997

October

November

December (January 1, 1998)

January

February

March

April

May

June

July

August

September 10

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Ra'esi/Ras	a duke and commander of the army
Degiat/Dejazmatch	commander of the palace gate
Fitawrari	commander of the vanguard
Qegnazmatch	commander of the right column
Grazmatch	commander of the left column
Blatta	a basic title in the feudal hierarchy
Bashai	a basic title in the feudal hierarchy
Haji	a Muslim title given to those who made the pilgrimage to Mecca
Sheikh	a Muslim title equivalent to Mr.
Haleqa	a deacon
Qeshi	a priest
Abba	a monk
Leqa Tiguhan	a title in the church hierarchy
Nebru'ed	the ecclesiastical and secular leader of Axum
Mereb Mellash	'Beyond the Mereb' — usually north of the Mereb, i.e., the territory that became Eritrea
Dergue	lit. 'committee' — a term that stuck with the military junta that ruled Ethiopia (1975-1991)

PREFACE

This is a study about the fluid nature of identity. The collective identity perceived by the trans-Mereb political actors of the past is disavowed by the current political entrepreneurs so much so that after a joint military victory in 1991 against an oppressive Amhara ethnic state they went their separate ways - Eritreans opted for independence and Tigrayans preferred to grab the state machinery in Addis Ababa and stay Ethiopian.

The rational political actors used numerous cultural and historical elements of their communities to resuscitate and re-fashion identity. Yet, this study argues, a policy of brute force pursued by the ethnic state singularly enhanced popular identity consciousness. The inhabitants of the trans-Mereb were treated as disposable and torturable. They were subjected to deportations, conscription and mass murder. Intellectuals and professional elites were being falsely implicated as members of the insurgent groups, arrested, tortured and/or killed.

The vulnerability of the trans-Mereb people was so pervasive that even this writer, a Tigrayan, who was working for his Ph.D. in anthropology at Berkeley in the 1980s was falsely branded by an Amhara fellow graduate student who had been Mengistu's cadre during the infamous "Red Terror" in Gondar. This false accusation, which prevented the writer from going to Ethiopia to do his research, entirely changed his career.

During my research work in 1993-94, the Tigrayan and Eritrean leaders gave me unlimited support and easy access to materials. Professors David Leonard and Robert Price offered me the Mellon/Sawyer Post-Doctoral Fellowship in the Institute of International Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, that gave me the time and the resources to work on the book. While researching in the Public Records Office in

London, I was given great hospitality by my brother Assefa. Similar hospitality from my sister Salem and my brother Asgedom in Maryland made my research work in the U.S. National Archives at College Park a lot easier. To all of them I extend my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation.

Alemseged Abbay
Berkeley, March 1998

INTRODUCTION



Tigrayans, south of the Mereb river, and the *Kebessa* (highland) Eritreans, north of the Mereb river, are ethnically one people, tied by common history, political economy, myth, language and religion. Both fought against a common enemy, an oppressive Amhara ethnic state — Eritreans for thirty years and Tigrayans for seventeen years. In the process of the armed struggle, both retained divergent political identities and, after jointly marching to military victory in 1991, they followed separate political paths — Eritreans created the newest state in Africa and Tigrayans remained Ethiopian.

The puzzle here is that in this part of the world ethno-regional nationalism, currently in vogue, betrayed the conventional wisdom and expected logic of establishing an ethno-regional state. The structural factors that tie the trans-Mereb region have failed to glue a common political identity. Given military victory, it is highly unlikely that the Kurds, the Kashmiris and other *ethnies*¹ (hereafter not to be italicized) in the world which have been engulfed in nationalist struggles would dispense with the creation of their separate nation-states. What

follows, a brief historical background of the trans-Mereb, makes the puzzle even more captivating.

A Brief Historical Background

Before colonialism in the 1880s, the Eritrean highlands (*Kebessa*), north of the Mereb, and Tigray proper to its south, shared a common ethnic identity — bound by economic interdependence, common language, religion, culture and history. The history that both share goes beyond the Axumite era of the first millennium A.D. The trans-Mereb was the cradle of the Axumite Empire whose power reached the Arabian Peninsula to the east and Meroe to the west. Thus, the main port of the Empire, Adulis, now in Eritrea, is as much Tigrayan as Eritrean; likewise, the capital of the Empire, Axum, now in Tigray, is as much Eritrean as Tigrayan.

Even when Axum declined by the 10th century A.D. and its empire was fragmented into independent petty states, *Kebessa* remained a part of Tigray. Nor did the occupation of the coast by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th century change the status of the *Kebessa* hinterland as part of Tigray. The semi-autonomous *Bahr Negasi* ("King of the Sea") who ruled *Kebessa* was not an independent leader.²

Kebessa continued to be a part of Tigray. In the 17th century, the trans-Mereb Tigray was ruled by the *Tigra Macuenen*. Dabarwa, in *Kebessa*, was the joint capital of the *Tigra Macuenen* and his subordinate, the *Bahr Negasi*.³ In the 18th century, too, James Bruce, observed the trans-Mereb to be an entity:

At Masuah, that is, on the coast of the Red Sea, begins an imaginary division of Abyssinia into two, which is rather a division of language than strictly to be understood as territorial. The first division is called Tigre, between the Red Sea and the river Tacazze. Between that river and the Nile, westward, where it bounds the Galla, it is called Amhara.⁴

In the first half of the 19th century, trans-Mereb Tigray extended from the Red Sea in the north-east to the Tekezze in the south-

west. Separated from the province of Amhara by the stream of Alewaha on the south, it was one of the two major provices of Abyssinia:

Les naturels de cette contrée divisent leur territoire en deux grande parties, dont l'une, appelée Tigré, occupe l'espace compris entre la mer Rouge et le Tacazé, tandis que l'autre s'étend depuis cette rivière jusqu'aux frontières du Sennâr et le Nil qui coule au delà de Gojam; on lui donne le nom d'Amhara; ...⁵

Due to its geographical location on the Red Sea coast en route from the Mediterranean to the Indian ocean, the trans-Mereb was a coveted region. Even prior to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Ottoman Empire had already established a foothold on the coast. But it started its gradual process of collapse in the 17th century and by 1853, when Czar Nicholas I called it the "sick man" of Europe, its terminal paralysis was only too conspicuous. Its Red Sea coast possessions passed to one of its former vassal states, Egypt, whose quest for territories beyond the coast did not materialize. The Egyptian advances were checked by the Tigrayan Emperor of Ethiopia Yohannes IV and his renowned lieutenant Alula at Gundet (1875) and Gura (1876). Their threat to Ethiopia came to an end when they were defeated by the Mahdist rebellion in the 1880s, forcing them out of the Sudan as well as the Red Sea littoral. The British were alone, struggling, on the one hand, to suppress the Mahdist uprising in the Sudan and, on the other, to take care of the Red Sea littoral which had just been vacated by the Egyptians.

Being preoccupied with the suppression of the Mahdist rebellion in the Sudan, the British decided to invite the Italians to fill the vacuum that was created by the Egyptian departure from the coast. Britain invited a friendly Italy to keep an eye on France which was a colonial competitor. Italy took over Massawa in 1885.

A strong Italian colonial ambition, however, was not going to be contained on the coast. Italy's initial encroachment into the highlands was checked at Dogali in 1887 by Alula. In

addition to posing a direct military threat from the coast, Italy continued arming Menelik, the Amhara king in the south, to help him attack Yohannes.

Furthermore, the Sudanese Mahdists advanced into Gondar in the west in retaliation for the Emperor's collaboration with the British during the evacuation of the Anglo-Egyptian forces from eastern Sudan in 1884. Thus, both the Mahdist invasion and Menelik's challenge successfully diverted the Emperor's attention away from the north, leaving it unattended.

Finally, the death of Yohannes in 1889 at Metemma fighting the Mahdists marked a watershed in trans-Mereb Tigrayan history. Tigray was completely exhausted from decades of uninterrupted wars. It had no resources to challenge the Italian colonialists to the north and the Amhara power contenders to the south.

Humiliating as it was for the Italians to be defeated by an African army in 1887, Dogali failed to terminate their dream of carving out a colony in the region. After the death of Yohannes, they annexed the hinterland and created "Eritrea" in 1890, dividing the Tigrinya-speaking trans-Mereb into two halves. *Kebessa* became the core of their *colonia primogenita* ("first-born colony").

Yet, Italian rapacity did not stop at the Mereb. Eritrea was going to be a launching pad for a major colonial project in the Horn and North of Africa. Although the Italian advance across the Mereb was checked at Adua in 1896, Italy did not give up in its colonial ambitions. Just as Dogali did not kill Italy's voraciousness, Adua did not deny it a chance for a larger colony. It occupied Ethiopia in 1936.

In *Africa Orientale Italiana*, Eritrea and Tigray were patched into "Greater Eritrea." The British who took administrative responsibility in Eritrea in 1941, after the Italian defeat in World War II, pursued the notion of "Greater Eritrea" by loosely retaining Tigray under the Asmara administration.

During the political uncertainties of the time, when people were wondering what the future was holding for them, they too began to envisage a trans-Mereb state for both Tigray and Eritrea. Thus the patching of the Tigrinya-speaking ethnies by the Italians and the British, nourished the "Tigray-Tigrignie"

nationalism. And the Eritrean political elites of the time transformed the notion of "Tigray-Tigrignie" into a political movement for independence.

This sense of identity was shared by the disgruntled Tigrayan elites south of the Mereb who, following the death of Emperor Yohannes in 1889, had lost the saddle of power to the Amhara and been politically marginalized. An independent "Tigray-Tigrignie" would have propelled them into power virtually without any contest. Their hereditary leadership role was acknowledged by *Kebessa* elites.

For the trans-Mereb elites, hence, the five decades of Italian rule of Eritrea was regarded as an inconsequential historical accident that could not attenuate the millennia-old trans-Mereb bondage. They argued that since the people of the trans-Mereb were one, they deserved to be independent.

The feudal political economy, shaped by the *risti* land tenure system (the usufructuary right to land on hereditary basis), was deeply entrenched in *Kebessa* and Tigray. The dignitaries of the trans-Mereb were invested with feudal titles such as *Ra'esi*, *Degiat*, *Fitawrari*, *Qegnazmatch*, *Grazmatch*, etc. The colonial impact on the political economy of Eritrea was negligible. And inasmuch as modernization refers to technological advancement, both Eritrea and Tigray were not modernized. Even if urbanization, access to consumption goods as well as adoption of Western values and etiquette were the litmus tests for modernization, only an insignificant section of the population, mostly in Asmara, would pass for being "modernized."

Since religion is a powerful source of collective consciousness, the Orthodox Church has symbolized the shared identity of the trans-Mereb people who have been its faithful adherents for 1600 years. The same religious passion kept Christian *Kebessa* and Muslim *Metahit* (lowland) Eritrea poles apart, preventing the rise of a pan-Eritrean identity.

The trans-Mereb people also share the same legends and heroes. *Ra'esi* Woldemichael Solomon whom Eritrean political elites have presented as an Eritrean hero, for instance, traced his ancestry to the Tigrayan *Ra'esi* Michael Suhul, who, as the strongest man in 18th century Ethiopia, was the king-maker in Gondar. Such myths are hardly abstract concepts. They reflect

people's thoughts which are inferred from the empirical observations of the prevalent socio-economic structures of a given society.

Similarly the trans-Mereb people share the Tigrinya language, which as an aspect and instrument of culture that helps shape human thought processes encodes empirical observations of existing social structures. The common ethos they have had are, therefore, the outcome of a common life unchanged for many generations.

Prior to the armed struggle, the political identity of the trans-Mereb elites was shaped by the shared commonalities. The same factors shape the current trans-Mereb civilian sense of identity as shown by informants from Seraye (the *Kebessa*) and Axum (Tigray). Tigrayans, for instance, prefer to intermarry with the *Kebessa* than with their fellow Tigrayan minority ethnies, the Afar and the Kunama. An 85-year-old informant says:

I have blood lineage in Seraye, Meraguz, on both my parents sides. Many people in Axum have that kind of relationship with *Kebessa*. It is the Italians who created a difference between us and them. Otherwise, we are one people - integral organs of Tigray-Tigrignie.⁶

Similarly, *Kebessa* civilians have an unequivocal preference for intermarriage with their Tigrayan kin south of the Mereb to their fellow Eritreans from other ethnic minorities, the Afar and the Kunama. A 74-year-old informant states:

We are related to Tigray by marriage. That has been going on throughout history. Even myself, I have a mixed ancestry. Take also Wolde-ab Woldemariam. He was born and raised here in Seraye but he was originally from Tigray. His Tigrayan father was a rich farmer here.⁷

It was this sense of common identity that sought the creation of an independent trans-Mereb state in the 1940s. The British Military Administration ruled Eritrea until 1952. Ethiopia's ef-

fective political maneuvering and U.S. strategic interests dictated Eritrea's fate. In 1952, the U.N. decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia. In 1962, Ethiopia unilaterally abrogated the federation, creating a unitary state and ushering in one of the longest and bloodiest civil wars in the world.

With the beginning of the armed struggle in 1961, the sense of commonality among the trans-Mereb elites that had been so profound until the 1950s gradually faded. The contemporary Eritrean and Tigrayan political entrepreneurs⁸ no longer share the sense of oneness of their predecessors. For the Eritrean revolutionary combatants (1961-1991), "Eritrea" meant the region north of the Mereb and not north of Alewaha, in effect excluding Tigray. For Tigrayan revolutionary combatants (1975-1991), similarly, "Tigray" meant the region south of the Mereb and north of Alewaha, excluding Eritrea. Even as Tigray entered the armed struggle in 1975, after having succumbed to the nationalist virus that had been so rampant in Eritrea for thirteen years by then, elites of both sides of the Mereb retained separate political identities. Notwithstanding the difference in visions and self-perceptions, they managed to coordinate their struggles against the Amhara minority regime.

Such comradeship in one of the world's most destructive battlefields would have been expected to bolster their common identity—a political identity forged by millennia—old shared political economy, religion, language, culture, myths and history. On the contrary, and despite the common trans-Mereb civilian sense of identity, the military victory of 1991 gave Eritrean elites a chance to create an independent state, the newest state in Africa. Similarly, the same victory propelled Tigrayan elites to power in Ethiopia. By sidestepping the creation of a "Greater Tigray" state after military victory, the current trans-Mereb rational political actors abandoned the common sense of identity that had been entertained by the 1940s political elites—a sense of identity that is still cherished by the trans-Mereb civilians. The failure of the shared commonalities and war against a common enemy to shape a single trans-Mereb political identity is puzzling.

A thesis is formulated to explain this oddity. Conflicts are often determined by major societal fault lines that are ridden

by class contradictions as in Czarist Russia, racial dissensions as in Apartheid South Africa, or religious discriminations as in the Sudan. In such cases, human actors use class, race and religion as resources for mobilization, and conflict follows polarized identity. However, conflicts are not always determined by such obvious societal fault lines. The existence of prior identifications that follow societal fault lines is not a precondition for mobilization. Instead, wars and miscalculated state war policies may be historical contingencies that are not necessarily the outgrowth of inherent contradictions between polarized identities. And they determine the contours of history in the present, offering human actors free-handed opportunities to mold identity configurations. As such, the invention of identity becomes mainly a post-victory phenomenon.

Methodology

To work on the afore-said thesis, I did a survey and archival research in 1993-1994. In Addis Ababa I worked in the TPLF archives and the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) which is preparing to bring former *Dergue* (the military junta) officials to court for crimes against humanity. Here I went through the 110 booklets of minutes of the regular and extraordinary meetings of the Political Bureau of the ruling party of Ethiopia. During every meeting the Minister of Security, Tesfaye Woldeselassie, presented reports on the situation in Eritrea and Tigray. Further issues like famine, deportation under the cloak of "resettlement" and conscription were discussed by the policy makers.

Archives are better organized in the Eritrean Research and Documentation Center, formerly Research and Information Center of Eritrea (RICE) in Asmara. In addition to consulting the materials of the 1940s and 1950s as well as those of the armed struggle era, I read the transcripts of the EPLF broadcasts in *Dimtsi Hafash Ertra* (Voice of the Eritrean Masses). I had to go to Mekelle, the Tigrayan capital, in order to read the transcripts of broadcasts made by *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray* (Voice of the Tigrayan Revolution).

I interviewed 56 former combatants and 56 civilians from Tigray and Eritrea. I met most of the 28 TPLF informants in Addis Ababa and all except one of the 28 EPLF informants in Asmara. My civilian informants were from Mendefera (the Kebessa) and Axum (Tigray). The two towns which have 15,000-20,000 people each, are found 80-90 kilometers away from the River Mereb, the political boundary separating Eritrea and Tigray which the Italians and Emperor Menelik created in 1890.

Selecting informants at random by knocking at doors was practically impossible. People were too suspicious of strangers, and I was extremely skeptical about non-random interviews, particularly those whose informants were selected with the help and guidance of government agents. However, the outcome could not have been more gratifying. Civilian informants are ruthlessly honest. They are guided by their past and traditions. For them, misrepresenting the past appears tantamount to betraying their forefathers and the essence of their own selfhood.

My research would have not been so complete without the European and American sources on the political conditions in the Horn of Africa during the 1940s and 1950s. I have found the archival materials in the Public Records Office in London and the U.S. National Archives in College Park, Maryland, extremely helpful.

Notes

1. A convenient French term that is increasingly in English texts.
2. Alvarez, F. trans. Lord Stanley, *Narratives of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia During the Years 1520-1527*. New York, 1881. pp. 8, 52-54, 59.
3. J. Rudolf, *A History of Ethiopia*. London: Samuel Smith Bookfeller, 1682. pp. 232-233
4. James Bruce, *Travels*. Glasgow: W. Falconer, 1818. p. 199
5. MM. ED. Combes and M. tamisier, *Voyage en Abyssinie 1835-1837*. Vol. II. Paris: Iouis Dessart, 1838. p.137. General Gordon's delegate who visited Ethiopia in the late 1870s also gave a simi

lar description: "The two great departments of Tigre and Amahra, north and south, occasionally united, have been jointly represented by one monarch under the national designation of 'king of the kings of Ethiopia,' whilst often in fierce antagonism they have ranged themselves under rival sovereigns enjoying only the minor title of Ras. "According to the delgate of the Governor-General of the Sudan. "The country ... is divided nominally into two portions, and the northern half, Tigre, is separated by the river Tecazze from the southern, Amhara." W. Winstanley, *A Visit to Abyssinia*. New York: Negro Universities Press, [1881] 1969. pp. 50, 53.

6. Interview: *Haleqa* Sequar Abbay (85). May 6 1994. Axum, Tigray.
7. Interview: Major Hagos Tewolde (74). July 16 1994. Mendefera, Eritrea.
8. Like their economic counterparts, political entrepreneurs mobilize resources (including human resources) and manage a risk-involving business. They assess situations, juggle with issues and calculate the cost-benefit of their actions in order to maximize returns. Whilst their economic counterparts aspire to maximize economic profits, political entrepreneurs aspire to maximize political power. In this endeavor, they may find it easier and cheaper, for instance, to mobilize people on the basis of their religious and/or ethno-regional identities than on their class identities. For further discussion on the concept of "political entrepreneurs," see David Laitin, "Hegemony and Religious Conflict: British Imperial Control and Political Cleavages in Yorubaland," in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds. *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985. pp. 285-316.

FORCES SHAPING IDENTITY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



Although the peoples of northern Ethiopia have had some form of statehood for millennia, it was at the turn of the nineteenth century that conquest and expansion gave the country most of its current shape. More than eighty ethnic groups were included within the current boundaries. Some have undergone assimilation, swallowed by the core culture and augmenting the size of the Amhara ethnics.

Major Ethnic Groups in Ethiopia¹ (Estimated population for 1995: 55 million)

Ethnicity	%
Oromo	35-40
Amhara	20-25
Tigrayan	6-8
Sidama	8
Somali	6

The enlarged empire-state brought into existence at the turn of century was dominated by a minority ethnic group, the Amhara. Their language became the national language, their army was made the national army, and the Coptic Orthodox Church, which they share with the Tigrayans, became the national church and the emerging bureaucracy filled with the Amhara elite. The net result was the emergence of an Ethiopian state with "a profound identity of its own, which was inherently discriminatory as between different peoples and regions within the country."² This plural society of the conflictual type was to be changed by violent upheavals. The 1974 anti-feudal Ethiopian popular revolution, that aspired to introduce democratic reforms in the country, actually ended up unleashing ethno-regional forces that, in 1991, brought the Amhara hegemony to its demise.

The processes that led to the ethno-regional nationalist upheavals are complex because identity is fluid and can be shaped by different forces in different contexts. Social scientists have written extensively on forces that shape identity such as language, religion, cultural map, developmental gap and the concomitant sense of relative deprivation. These theories could be lumped together into two clusters of views - the primordialist and the instrumentalist perspectives.

The Primordialist View

The primordial elements of language, history etc., which are sources of powerful energy, have been forgers of ethno-regional nationalism in the Horn of Africa.³ Market forces, and the attendant bureaucratic state, failed to shed the ethnic character of the Ethiopian state. The core Amhara ethnics aspired to transform the multi-ethnic society into an Amhara nation-state. Yet, despite remarkable success in enlarging itself by assimilating many non-Amhara peoples, it could not completely kill all the peripheral ethnic particularities. Furthermore, since identity is psychological and a matter of perception,⁴ even those who were regarded as hopelessly assimilated have managed to recapture their sense of identity, since the downfall of the Amhara.

The energy that primordial factors produce cannot be generated even by concrete economic grievances. Economic arguments of a real or perceived sense of deprivation could serve as catalysts, but not preconditions, of conflicts.⁵ As the Quebecois' quest for "*maitres chez nous*" ("masters in our own house") demonstrates, economic arguments can hardly explain the somewhat "religious" character of the desire to have one's own political roof. Since primordial elements are potent forgers of identity, not only in predominantly peasant societies of the Horn of Africa, but in the industrialized West as well, the argument that market forces dilute centrifugal tendencies is invalid.⁶ Centrifugal ethnic and religious forces thus retained diversity in Eritrea, where market forces tended to be stronger than in the rest of Ethiopia. This was further reinforced by the Italian policy of "divide et impera" (1890-1941), a policy retained by the British (1941-1952) and the Ethiopians (1952-1991).

Ethnic Break-Down in Eritrea⁷
(Estimated population for 1995: 3.5 million)

Tigrinya [Tigrayan]	50
Tigre	31.4
Saho	5
Afar	5
Begia	2.5
Bilen	2
Kunama	2
Nara	1.5
Rashaida	0.5

On the contrary, market forces exacerbate differences even in non-colonial countries like Ethiopia.⁸ Once they bring various groups into contact, even non-primordial social differences surface to serve as border markers.⁹ It was such social differences that created the "us and them" dichotomy between the Eritreans and the Amhara as soon as Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. Eritreans began to see the Amhara as the "relevant other"

against whom they started to contrast themselves and highlighted their unique identity.

The Instrumentalist View

This view sees ethno-regional identity as fluid, waxing and waning depending on how elites feel about their social positions and the access they have to social, economic and political resources. It is a serviceable resource for elite competition. And since elites themselves are products of the market system, identity-based conflicts vary with the level of modernization and education.¹⁰

Spatial diffusion of modernization favors one ethnics over another and, where modernity takes place determines who reaps its fruits, giving ethnic groups the image of being bound by economic interests and not traditional ties.¹¹ Using regional economic discrepancy as an illustrative example of discrimination, elites may become "the worst peddlers of tribalism."

In the quest for the most coveted resource, state power, nationalism is embraced by political entrepreneurs who analyze the cost-benefit of their actions. They assess their self-interests, appraise the social reality, and weigh the net advantage of their actions. Then they opt for a nationalist course of action promoting "traditional" consciousness.¹² However, cost-benefit calculations tend to be more explicit among leaders than among rank-and-file participants and potential followers.¹³

However, elites do not always have centrifugal tendencies, struggling for separate political roofs. When the economy is prospering, they may make the "rational choice" of sticking with the core in a larger unit. If, on the other hand, the aggressive state makes economic, cultural and political intrusions on the periphery, elites of the periphery may become "ethno-regional missionaries" and decide to disaffiliate from the core.¹⁴

War and Identity Formation

The *Dergue* policy of brute force alienated the Eritrean and Tigrayan peasant masses. Since reaction to such behavior is a protective instinct, peasants who otherwise had little contact

not only with the political entrepreneurs but even among themselves, tightened their communal unity. In this way, war undermines preexisting intra-group fissions and squabbles,¹⁵ and shared agonies enhance group consciousness than peace does:

Essentially, France owes the consciousness of its national unity only to its fight against the English, and only the Moorish war made the Spanish regions into one people... The United States needed the War of Independence; Switzerland, the fight against Austria; the Netherlands, rebellion against Spain; the Achaean League, the struggle against Macedonia; and the founding of the new German Empire furnishes a parallel to all of these instances.¹⁶

Genocidal and Genocidal-like States and Identity Formation

When an ethnic state in a plural society fails to win "spontaneous consent" for its hegemony, it can resort to coercion. Often, force engenders counterforce. Failing to subdue resistance, the state gets frustrated and resorts to mass murder, known as "genocide," a term coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 from *genos*, race or tribe in Greek, and *cide*, killing in Latin.¹⁷

The perpetrator of mass violence, often the state, defines an ethnic or racial group as "the enemy."¹⁸ Multi-ethnic societies like Ethiopia tend to be the frequent sites for such human tragedies because the "us and them" line is easy to mark. During the war in Ethiopia, *Dergue* propaganda tried to ostracize the Eritreans and Tigrayans to make them vulnerable to violence. And vulnerability is an essential element that causes target groups to become easy prey.¹⁹

Genocides are almost always perpetrated by ruling elites, making them functional and rationally instrumental, mostly in order to politically neutralize a good section of a population.²⁰ The 1988 massacres of innocent Tigrayan market-goers in Hauzien and Eritrean peasants in She'eb boils down to elite egoism.²¹ Even massacres couched by religious fanaticism such as those of the Armenians, have nothing to do with faith.²²

Yet, this kind of functionalist theory cannot fully explain genocides. The Dergue did not entirely fabricate genocidal-like situations in the vacuum. Historical tensions have always existed between the Amhara elites and the aggrieved Tigrinya-speaking elites who lost power to the former in 1889. Just as memory of the 1972 massacre was being summoned in Burundi to create the "grande peur" (Great Fear) so that it could reorder identities,²³ the Dergue summoned historical eras of the Axumite Empire, the reign of Yohannes IV and the 1940s "Tigray-Tigrignie" risorgimento to instil fear among the Amhara of possible Tigrayan hegemony. It was this type of propaganda that the Dergue disseminated to alienate Eritreans and Tigrayans. There were, therefore, social structures that favored the production of biases and stereotypes against the targeted groups.

Otherwise, unless there are such underlying structures, the broad propaganda that precedes the act of genocide would not be effective in producing "consensual paranoia."²⁴ "Consensual paranoia" is essential for bystanders to share the perception of perpetrators of genocide that their victims are obstacles to something they want. Yet, the vast majority of the victims have nothing to do with the source of the conflict.²⁵ In the course of such propaganda of hatred, as in the case of Ethiopia against Eritreans and Tigrayans, communal polarization crystallizes.

Violence could also take the form of man-made famine or turning a blind eye to an otherwise a natural catastrophe. As in the case of the 1930s famine in Ukraine²⁶ or the 1915 deportations of the Armenians,²⁷ famine in Eritrea and Tigray was a vital political tool for the Dergue to starve the people into submission and/or deportation. Thus, communal identities were solidified in such aura of mistrust, hatred, and recurrent massacres. Tales of ordeal revitalized group sense of identity which was based on a sense of survival.

In summary, we wait to see how the primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives fare in the Eritrean and Tigrayan case studies. With these theoretical frameworks as background, we will see whether identification is a condition sine qua non of mobilization and whether identity-driven mobilization is

essential for military victory. We will also see if these views can explain whether identification is not a post-victory phenomenon which relies upon victory for its construction.

Notes

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ADVENT OF COLONIALISM AND THE BIFURCATION OF AN ETHNIE



Frontiers come and go, administrative groupings can be modified by a stroke of the pen, but geography and physical distribution of peoples are permanent.

—Stephen Longrigg, 1946

With the departure of the Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes of Ethiopia from the political scene in 1889, Menelik's ascendancy to the throne and the Italian advance to the Red Sea hinterland became easy rides. Immediately, Menelik and Italy signed the Wuchale Treaty whereby the new Amhara emperor of Ethiopia accepted the Mereb as the political boundary of Italian Eritrea and Ethiopian Tigray, dividing the Tigrayan ethnie in two halves:

The death of the Tigrean emperor Yohannes in 1889, and the division of the Tigrinya-speaking area with the creation of Eritrea, converted a region which might (once in a while, anyhow) provide an emperor, into one in which local notables squabbled for local prizes, and in

the process rendered themselves increasingly dependent on either the colonial authorities in Asmara, or the Shoan emperor in Addis Ababa.¹

Eritrea: In Search of Self-Identity

Italian Eritrea (1890-1941): The *Kebessa* have shared myths, historical memories and cultural affinity, which are among the fundamental features of national identity,² with their Tigrayan kinfolk south of the Mereb rather than with their fellow Eritreans of the *Metahit*. The historical memory that they share with Tigrayans goes to the 10th century B.C. Legends such as that of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Israel tie the two together. Myths of this nature serve as the paradigms for a sense of identity.³ This historically- and culturally-rooted oneness was severely challenged when Eritrea was created "by an act of surgery: by severing its different peoples from those with whom their past had been linked and by grafting the amputated remnants to each other."⁴ In this way nine ethnies with mainly, Christian and Islamic creed, were aggregated for the first time in Italy's "first-born colony" and given the "Eritrean" appellation—after the Latin name for the Red Sea—*Mare Erythraeum*.

Kebessa, with its pleasant climate, fertile land and dense population, emerged as the core of Eritrea. Here urban centers mushroomed and the Tigrinya-speaking Christians felt the impact of colonialism most. They reaped the fruits of modernity and bore the hardships of colonialism. As such, the *Kebessa* stood out as the Eritreans to be reckoned with. Although they constituted only half of the overall population, their political elites played a decisive role in the fate of Eritrea in the 1940s. Diversity, however, was a hurdle for the rise of a political identity based on common culture, history and aspirations.⁵ In fact, the relationship of the mutually unfamiliar ethnies was characterized by fear and suspicion of one another.

Having lost their emperor in Metemma, being stricken by a deadly famine and having consumed their energy fighting the Mahdists, the trans-Mereb feudalists posed no serious challenge to the Italian advance. On the contrary, Bahta Hagos of

Akele Guzai, Hadgembes of Hamasien and other *Kebessa* as well as *Metahit* agrarian elites

collaborated with the Italians for their selfish interests without any demur. Before the advent of the Italians, the chiefs of both the highlands and lowlands had been collaborating with the Turks.⁶

Linguistic Diversity in the 1950s Eritrea (U.N. Commission for Eritrea)

	Highlands	Red Sea	Western	Total	%
Tigrinya	387,000	-----	9,000	396,000	46.7
Tigre	-----	29,000	29,000	243,000	32.08
Saho	63,000	7,000	-----	70,000	8.25
Bilen	-----	-----	37,000	37,000	4.36
Afar	-----	28,000	-----	28,000	3.3
Other	-----	-----	45,000	45,000	5.31
Total	450,000	64,000	334,000	848,000	100.00

Tigrayans: Tigrinya-speaking agriculturalists of the *Kebessa* (Hamasien, Seraye and Akele Guzai). They are predominantly Coptic Orthodox Christians with a minority of Muslims, the *Jiberti*, among them.

Tigre: Tigre-speaking, mainly Muslim pastoralists, found in the Sahel plains and the western lowlands as well as on the coast.

Saho: Saho-speaking, mainly Muslim pastoralists in the eastern and southeastern lowlands.

Bilen: Bilen-speaking, predominantly Muslim pastoralists in the western plateau.

Afar: Afar-speaking Muslim pastoralists in the eastern and south eastern lowlands.

Nara and Kunama: Two Nilotic-speaking pastoralist ethnic groups from the western plateau. They are animists and catholics.

Rashaida: A small number of Arabic-speaking Muslim pastoralists living along the coast.

Even in *Kebessa*, however, the Italian factor in transforming the life and culture of the indigenous people was minimal despite the flow of immense capital and technology to the territory within a short span of time. The flow of capital and technology was meant to serve the Italians who had initially prized Eritrea as a settlement colony given its "everlasting spring" climate.⁷ They also attached a special value to it as a springboard for their colonial ambition in Ethiopia. It was at this time (1932-1941) that Eritrea took on the appearance of a real settlement colony with Italians making up 12% of its population.⁸ The settlers' livelihood was tied to the industrial and commercial economy.⁹ These changes took place on the eve of World War II when the military economy prospered in Eritrea. Cathedrals and cinema halls were opened, boulevards were paved and neat Italian residential quarters were built. The capital of Asmara looked a transplanted European city in the midst of rural Africa. Urbanization transformed the region into an agreeable "white man's country."¹⁰ For all that, the indigenous people were confined to their "native quarters" and were minimally affected by the sudden *Europeanization* of their country. Eritreans, for instance, had no access to low-paying clerical jobs such as postal and telegraph services.¹¹ Even drudgery was filled by the Italians: "More than 50,000 Italian laborers were brought to Eritrea, including dock-workers, roadmen, constructors, mechanics, and common labourers."¹² A British governor observed:

When the British reached Asmara, they found there some 70,000 Italians, filling every kind of post. Quite subor-

dinate posts were filled by Italians, and Eritreans had not been given much of a chance, except in the army.¹³

This perhaps indicates that Eritrea was a classical colonial entity, cut in two compartments and inhabited by two mutually unfamiliar populations—the indigenous and the settler. The two populations adhered to what Fanon terms, “the principle of reciprocal exclusivity,”¹⁴ minimally influencing each other. Miscegenation, particularly after 1937, was prohibited as a behavior that would lead to Italian racial degradation.¹⁵ For natives, it was illegal even to promenade the sidewalks of the main streets of Asmara and a trespass to be found in the Italian residential quarters. They were not welcome in public places such as cafes. They could only be served tea or coffee outside through the cafe windows with tinware cups, instead of the dishware cups with which the Italian customers were served.¹⁶ The color bar was so highlighted that, “There are separate windows at post offices, separate seats in buses and separate taxis.”¹⁷ While the Italians were active in the market system, the indigenous population remained in poverty, significantly unaffected by the introduction of the new economic system. The degree of socio-economic segregation and mutual exclusiveness between the two makes Fanon’s statement that “You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” appear less polemical.

In its five decades of colonial rule, Italy denied Eritreans the chance of education. They could only study up to the fifth grade in one of four schools in the country. Even that was scaled down to the third grade during the Fascist era.¹⁸ Natives and, after 1938, even half-castes who had been recognized by their fathers, could not attend Italian schools.¹⁹ This minimal education gave some Eritreans the language skills their Italian masters required of them, although the rudimentary language skills, too, were not widely offered. After four decades of occupation, in 1931, only 1.1% of the population knew some basic Italian.²⁰ Otherwise, the denial of education was so absolute that, according to the last British governor of Eritrea, “Even finding literate people who could be employed was not quite easy.”²¹ Thus it was a vain attempt to look for native intellectuals when

one could not even find Eritreans who were "dusted over by the colonial culture," to use Fanon's expression. The "deliberate, and indeed cynical, policy of keeping the Eritrean's belly full and his head empty"²² earned the Italians political tranquility and prevented the rise of vibrant and dynamic elites. There were no nationalist elites capable of leading their country to independence, as happened later in other African countries.

Although Italians and Eritreans lived worlds apart,²³ land alienation and conscription did bring them into contact, often conflictual. Between 1893 and 1895, more than half of the arable land in the country was set aside for confiscation.²⁴ However, resistance was imminent. For instance, land confiscation was a major source of conflict between the Italians and their protegee, the governor of Akele Guzai, Bahta Hagos, who had welcomed them and went to the extent of embracing their creed of Catholicism. When he saw the best land of Akele Guzai taken away and given to Italian farmers or made "Crown Land" (*Terre Dementiale*) he led a popular uprising in 1894 with 1,500 well-armed men.²⁵ Such bitter resistance against land expropriation was because land was the only source of livelihood for the *Kebessa*.²⁶

Undoubtedly, in a region that had seen nothing but war and famine for generations (except for the 12 years when Alula became its governor), *pax Italiana* gave Eritreans a normal and peaceful life. Food and consumer goods were cheap and such "calculated policy of 'bread and circuses,'" did indeed avert public discontent, keeping Eritreans acquiescent.²⁷ Yet, the hypothetical possibility of land alienation remained a source of suspicion against the Italians and Italophobia, hitherto confined to the minuscule elite, was creeping into the rural masses, albeit at a slow pace.

Conscription, however, was assiduously implemented and parents were made to give away their children to fight Italy's wars in Ethiopia, Libya and Somalia. It was with Eritrean conscripts (the *ascaris*) that Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935/36.²⁸

In *l'Africa Orientale Italiana*, Tigray was brought into the Asmara administration of "Greater Eritrea." The trans-Mereb people were once again brought together, providing supple-

mentary background for the 1940s "Tigray-Tigrignie" nationalism. After 47 years of separation, gluing them together was not difficult as the *Kebessa* did not see themselves different from Tigrayans.

The "material equipment and modern services far ahead of usual colonial standards" that half a century of Italian rule brought to Eritrea²⁹ failed to give Eritrea its own distinct identity cutting across geography, religion and ethnicity. Even in 1971, three decades after the Italian departure and, a decade of armed struggle against the oppressive Amhara regime, Eritreans had not yet developed a common identity, as Wolde-ab admits:

The Eritrean communities (Moslems and Christians) lived always separately even after the country was united by the Italians in 1889 and have never lived under a government of their own together for at least four hundred years. In other words, the two communities are still strangers to one another.³⁰

Colonialism has given many countries their identity. In India, for instance, "a common British background seems almost as important as the fact of the common Indian heritage."³¹ In Eritrea, however, colonial experience failed to fill the vacuum created by the absence of a common heritage. Whereas colonial experience made Eritreans feel more "modernized" than the Amhara, it failed to create a similar chasm with the Tigrayans. In the 1940s, the absence of a common colonial experience for both Eritrea and Tigray did not preclude the rise of "Tigray-Tigrignie" nationalism based on a common heritage.

British Eritrea (1941-1952): The war economy in Eritrea, which needed capital and technology, recruitment of young men in the army and the availability of service jobs, was intensified during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41). After the Italians were driven out of Eritrea in 1941, the economy collapsed and the British, who were entrusted with administration, had no desire to invest capital and technology in a country where they were not going to stay.

Yet, they are credited for developing education after finding no educated people able to assume administrative responsibilities. They also gave Eritreans limited freedom of press and political organization. The fast-growing printing technology produced various newspapers. The press became for Eritreans a political forum to conduct heated discussions on the fate of their country — *le papier qui parle* (the paper which speaks), as in Eugene Weber's thesis.³²

Eritreans "imagined"³³ their community in different ways. The Eritrea that *Metahit* elites imagined was not the same Eritrea that *Kebessa* elites imagined. Religion was a major defining element of identity and two conceptualizations of nationalism rooted in religion developed. The *Metahit* had a strong aversion to "Christian" Ethiopia where Muslims were discriminated against. Unlike the Christians who tended to gravitate to Tigray and/or Ethiopia, the Muslims conceptualized an independent Eritrea. A delegate of the Muslim League told the U.N.:

I ask the members of this committee why European colonialism is being fought and opposed? Is it in order to replace it by an African form of colonialism? Ethiopia asked for Somaliland to be annexed to it in spite of the very substantial differences and discrepancies between them - historical, religious, linguistic and racial differences...

But we are glad to see that Somaliland has its right to independence recognized. Why, therefore, are we being deprived of this natural right which has been given to Libya and Somaliland?³⁴

Religion as a source of identity was so profound that some of the *Metahit* preferred joining Muslim Sudan to "Christian" Ethiopia. Yet, the official goal of the Muslim League remained the independence of an undivided Eritrea, as stated by the polite words of Abdel Kadir Kebire, one of its leading members:

We do not have any enmity with Ethiopia. I would also like to say that we do not have any contradictions with the Sudan or Egypt. In fact, we express our deep appre-

ciation to those countries and we bless them to live in harmony. The only thing we want is our rights, as other peoples and governments would. Because we have developed this desire, we should not be regarded as wrong-doers.³⁵

Christian *Kebessa*, on the other hand, had a strong aversion to the Muslim *Metahit* and were bitter against the Europeans. They, therefore, gravitated readily to Ethiopia and/or Tigray. With Tigray, they shared common political economy, history, language, script, religion, culture, etc, further reinforced by ages-old intermarriages and economic interdependence:

In culture the Eritrean plateau-folk are Tigraeans in all essentials of habit and custom, land-tenure and family-usage; and they have throughout the ages intermarried freely within the whole Tigrinya-speaking block (of which roughly half lives to-day in Eritrea and half in the Tigray).³⁶

By and large, independent "Christian" Ethiopia, with its own king and a rainbow-colored flag, was revered by many people in *Kebessa*. However, such southward gravitation was mainly because of Tigray which served Eritrea as a bridge to the rest of Ethiopia. This is what we understand from the earlier views of Wolde-ab, who, in 1991 after four decades of exiled life and determined struggle for Eritrean independence, was crowned with the prestigious title "Father of Eritrea":

I do not have the desire to separate Eritreans from Tigrayans and Eritrea from Tigray. I have been struggling from deep down [my heart] so that the two [peoples] and the two [regions] would not split. And it is certain that when I speak about Eritrea and Tigray, I am also speaking about the whole of Ethiopia.³⁷

It was this "oneness" with Tigray "even a foreigner cannot deny"³⁸ which was the main basis for Eritrean identification with Ethiopia. Wolde-ab, for one, could not imagine an Eritrean

nation. He looked to the past and could not discover the Eritrean *Adi Abo* (Fatherland). His anguish was similar to that of the Algerian nationalist, Ferhat Abbas, who in 1939 stated "there is no Algerian nation, no Algerian *patrie*."³⁹

Yet, at times, the romantic view of Ethiopia and its king bordered on absurdity when even the most enlightened of *Kebessa* elites such as Wolde-ab, stated that although the seat of the Ethiopian government was in Shoa, the regime was actually that of the Tigrayans, and not that of the Amhara.⁴⁰ Perhaps, Wolde-ab took the ruling Amhara "Solomonic" Dynasty's fanciful claims of descent from the Queen of Sheba too literally.

Thus, the different ethnies that were brought together by the Italians did not see one another as Eritreans. As such, they did not struggle for a common political roof. Because there were no "Eritreans," there was no political party in the *Kebessa* that seriously attempted to "make" Eritrea in the territory north of the Mereb. For *Kebessa* elites creating "Eritrea" first and "Eritreans" next looked an impossible dream of putting the cart before the horse. It was incomprehensible for them that "a nation is whatever can get away with establishing its claim to being one."⁴¹ They were unaware of the fact that Italy and Pakistan could be and were created prior to the creation of the Italians and Pakistanis. Nor did elites, including the "Father of Eritrea," Wolde-ab, have faith in the economic viability of an independent Eritrea:

Eritrea is not a rich country. It is one of the poorest countries in the world. It belongs to Ethiopia and it had been taken from it by the Italians. All Europeans and Americans would not need it because it would be a liability to them — they would get no benefit from it. It has no gold, nor any other minerals.⁴²

According to Wolde-ab, joining Ethiopia was a matter of life and death. To save their lives, Eritreans had to join Ethiopia:

If Ethiopia does not acquire Eritrea, it will suffer and be disappointed; but it will not die. If Eritrea, on the other hand, does not get united with Ethiopia, it will die.⁴³

Consequently, the complete absence of a distinct sense of identity, on the one hand, and the lack of confidence that Eritrea could "go it alone," on the other, made Ethiopia's heavy-handed intervention in the 1940s political squabbles a lot easier, bringing the Unionist Party under its direct control.

The Unionist Party

By stressing the primordial links, along with economic and other ties that Eritrea had with Ethiopia, some of the *Kebessa's* elites joined the Unionist Party during the 1940s.

In 1941, Eritrean elites such as Wolde-ab created *Mahber Fiqri Haggat* ("Association of Love of the Country"), a non-political organization that intended to look after the property and welfare of Eritreans following the Italian departure. It is this organization that underwent mysterious metamorphosis to become the Unionist Party. The organization that was responsible for giving the *Mahber Fiqri Haggat* a Unionist political agenda appears to have emerged in Addis Ababa. On February 27 1944, the "Ethiopian-Hamasien Union Association" was created in Addis Ababa by Eritreans in high government positions such as Dawit Oqbaizgi.⁴⁴ The Association was working hard both in Addis Ababa and Asmara to bring about the merger of Eritrea with Ethiopia. Its officials used to travel freely between Eritrea and Ethiopia, apparently making their Association the chief catalyst for the metamorphosis of *Mahber Fiqri Haggat* to the Unionist Party. The Unionist Party, whose existence was conspicuous by the late 1940s, favored an unconditional unity with Ethiopia:

... more important and intimate to our outlook and mentality is the basic fact that for over 3,000 years our ancestors have formed an integral part of Ethiopia. Our common origins, traditions, languages, religions and interests make that attachment too profound to express

adequately or even clearly in words. It is that profound sentiment of nationality on which Mazzini based his appeal to the peoples of Italy, that same profound sense of nationality that makes Brittany or Provence French, and that makes Scotsmen British.⁴⁵

Among the first to fall into Ethiopian hands was the Eritrean Coptic Church which played a central role in the Unionist Party. The Church has always been the custodian of Ethiopian tradition. Further, having lost substantial land to the colonial state which became *Terre Dementiale*, the Church had direct material interests in supporting the Ethiopian cause.⁴⁶ There was also the self-interest of *Abune* (Bishop) Marcos who, as an Italian appointee of the Eritrean Coptic Church, had never been recognized by the Ethiopian Coptic Church. Thus, in order to get confirmation for his position, Marcos became an ardent supporter of unity and he was threatening his followers with excommunication unless they became Unionists. They would not get Church services for the burial of their dead nor the weddings of any of their immediate relatives, nor were they entitled to holy communion.⁴⁷

Terror as a Political Weapon: As well as ecclesiastical elites, secular elites were being corrupted by Ethiopia's money. For instance, the Unionist leader Tedla Bairu used to receive his income from the Ethiopian Government through subsidies given to the Party.⁴⁸ Those who could not be swayed by money and Church propaganda and threat, however, were physically harassed. Harassment ranged from beating to shooting. In 1947, some 500 opponents of unity, for instance, were harassed and forced to return without meeting the fact-finding mission of the "Big Four" Powers in Terra Emni, Seraye.⁴⁹ One informant recalled his 1947 ordeal as he and others approached the representatives of the U.S.A, U.S.S.R., U.K and France in Seraye to express their political stand on the fate of their country:

About 68 of us went to Terra Emni (Seraye) to express our views to the representatives of the Big Four. We were

beaten up by the Unionists who were numerically superior to us.⁵⁰

In the urban centers many people were targets of terrorist gangs who had no shortage of arms which were being smuggled from Ethiopia.⁵¹ Wolde-ab Woldemariam who, far from being "the Eritrean Quisling,"⁵² advocated for conditional unity with Ethiopia, survived seven attempts on his life by gunshots, hand grenades and poisoning during 1947-1953.⁵³ The Amhara were opposed to any "conditions." Others such as Abdel Kadir Kebire, who was the head of the Asmara branch of the Muslim League, were not as lucky. He was shot to death as he was preparing to leave for New York to express his party's stance to the U.N.⁵⁴

Trained, equipped and financed by Ethiopia, *shiftas* (bandits) who also called themselves "patriots" were masters of the rural regions. Carrying the Ethiopian flag, they terrorized the Eritrean countryside with the slogan "Say 'Ethiopia', if you do not want to be lashed by a whip" (*"Etopiya bel ye, be shimel keyti himel ye"*).⁵⁵ They ceased terrorizing the country when Aklilu Habtewold, the then Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, announced in 1950 that a settlement by way of federation had been reached and they had to give up their banditry. Ethiopia offered many of the *shifita* leaders asylum and employment.⁵⁶

As a victor against the Italians, Ethiopia was perceived by many of the *Kebessa* as a champion of Eritrean anti-colonial struggle. Since Eritreans received no education and were subjected to an "apartheid" type of rule, they "preferred the devil to the Italians."⁵⁷ Clearly, Ethiopia exploited the prevalent Eritrean anti-Italian feelings so much so that many "truly believed we were Ethiopians. Our political consciousness was nil. All we knew for sure was that the Italians and the British were alien."⁵⁸

At the same time, Ethiopia gave Eritreans the impression that if they did not join Ethiopia Italy was going to return and rule them. The spread of this calculated paranoia was reinforced by the continued employment of Italians in the British administration and the attendant optimism of the Italians that their country was ultimately going to return to its ex-colony.⁵⁹ Thus

the murder of innocent Italians was intended to give Eritreans the impression that Ethiopia was struggling against the return of Italy. For this reason, Ethiopia apparently encouraged its agents, both the urban terrorists and the rural *shifta*, to kill Italians along with anti-Unionist Eritreans. In 1949 alone, 19 innocent Italians and two prominent pro-independence Eritreans were among those killed.⁶⁰

The most notorious of the *shiftas* were the Mosazgi brothers who used to kill Italians on highways and eliminate anti-Unionists. Woldegabriel Mosazgi, for instance, once threw a hand grenade through the window of a bar on the way to Asmara targeting Italian customers.⁶¹ Like the rest of the *shifta*, the Mosazgi brothers had a clear Ethiopian connection:

On March 24th 1950, the well known terrorist bandits Uolde-ghebriel Mosasghi and his brother, Berhe Mosasghi, offered and enacted to the Ethiopian authorities at Axum in their name and on behalf of their followers, their allegiance.⁶²

Nebru'ed Gebremeskel, the Eritrean governor of Axum (the future *Abune* Yohannes, bishop of Tigray), was mainly responsible for supplying the *shiftas* with guns and other facilities.⁶³ Thus, *shiftas* such as the Mosazghi brothers that Eric Hobsbawm includes within his category of "social bandits"⁶⁴ were more akin to mercenaries who took up arms to fulfil Ethiopia's ambitions.

Terror and corruption went hand in hand. Eritreans residing in Ethiopia and holding high government portfolios such as Lorenzo Taezaz, Dawit Oqbazgi and *Blatta* Ephrem Tewoldemedhin used to come to Eritrea for mysterious missions, meeting Unionist leaders.⁶⁵ For instance, *Blatta* Ephrem, the top official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, used to stay in Asmara up to two months at a time for no official reason.⁶⁶ Similarly, Unionist leaders such as *Abune* Marcos used to go to Addis frequently, again for obscure purposes, not excluding the confirmation of his Italian appointment as the head of the Eritrean Coptic Church.⁶⁷

Fear of the "Others" - Metahit Muslims: Religion was the main marker of identity in Eritrea. *Kebessa* Christians and *Metahit* Muslims, despite being Eritreans, were strangers to one another. They were fearful of one another and bitter and savage conflicts were not uncommon.⁶⁸

The fact that the *Metahit* imagined a different Eritrea could be illustrated by what the Muslim League wanted for an official language. In the *Memorandum* the League presented to the U.N. Commissioner, it said:

We would prefer that Arabic be the official language of Eritrea, but at the same time, in order to meet the wish of the United Nations to respect the language in use, and also to meet the wishes of the Tigrinya-speaking population, we have nothing against the recognition of Tigrinya as an official language, together with Arabic.⁶⁹

Tigrinya is spoken and understood by more than half of the Eritrean population whilst only a few people speak and understand Arabic. Primacy of Arabic over Tigrinya was anathema to the Christian population.

The lack of a common political identity was responsible for the innocence manifested by many of the *Kebessa*. "We did not understand the actual politics," said one informant. "Carrying the Ethiopian flag, we were simply following *Abune Marcos* saying 'Ethiopia was our country.'"⁷⁰ According to another informant, "Ethiopia" was a venerated name. The Unionists extracted the phrase "Ethiopia stretches out its hands unto God" from the Bible and ventilated it among the *Kebessa* in support of their cause. Such propaganda was effective among the Christians whose holy place was Axum, in the Ethiopian Tigray:

Our problem was that we were asked to decide on our fate immediately after World War II. And we were not ready. If we had remained under colonialism for another ten years like the rest of the African countries, we would have demanded independence unanimously and we would have been free. In the 1940s, though, we innocently believed Ethiopia was going to liberate us from

the European rule. So we fell prey to Ethiopia; and Ethiopia trampled us over, mercilessly destroyed us, killed our children ...⁷¹

In addition to the anti-European card, Ethiopia also played the traditionally anti-Islamic/Arab card. Arabs had their property looted and were physically assaulted.⁷² There was a campaign of calculated xenophobia and according to an informant, "Our chief, the *Mislene*, *Azmach* Tesfai, told us 'Instead of joining the Arabs, it was better for us to join Christian Ethiopia.'"⁷³

Ethiopian Identity - By Default? The anti-Italian and anti-Arab/Muslim feelings were so pervasive in *Kebessa* that for some, by default or by design, Ethiopia appeared the best choice:

We are Ethiopians. We are not Italians; we are not English; we are not Sudanese; we are not Egyptians. Since the ancient times, our territory had belonged to the Ethiopian state.⁷⁴

Here the conspicuous absence of "We are Eritreans; we are not Ethiopians" indicates the inability of Eritreans to imagine a sovereign community. Since an independent Eritrea had never existed, people could not imagine they could "go it alone":

We trusted Ethiopia. Where else could we look for? Our children [the current revolutionary elites] were not there. We were not educated. Italy colonized us for 50 years and we hated it. Ethiopia was considered a fall back. Led by *Azmach* Tesfai, the *Mislene* of Meraguz, we used to say we were Ethiopians. How else could we defend ourselves from the Muslim League [of *Metahit* Eritrea]?⁷⁵

The combination of strong anti-European sentiment, the fear of the *Metahit* and the profound identification with Tigray combined made many of the *Kebessa* look toward Ethiopia. Even prominent nationalists such as Wolde-ab had strongly believed that Eritrea was Ethiopian. Wolde-ab, at some point, expressed

the deep gratitude Eritreans owed the British for liberating Ethiopia: "We like the English government because it supported Our Mother Ethiopia and Our Father the *Negus* [Haile Selassie]." ⁷⁶ Further, Wolde-ab emphatically wrote, "Eritrea belongs to Ethiopia. It is Ethiopia itself and should return to Ethiopia." "Eritreans," he continued, "do not beg Ethiopian-ness from others; they give Ethiopian-ness to others." As the editor of *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*, Wolde-ab used to give front page coverage to the activities of Emperor Haile Selassie and the rest of the royal family who were being treated with great respect. It was such gravitation to Ethiopia even by some of the most enlightened *Kebessa* elites that opened the way for Ethiopia's direct intervention.

But Ethiopia's heavy hand did not allow the Unionist Party independence. Its leaders were on the Ethiopian payroll and they were expecting high government positions. They did not have their own program and were only implementing the decisions made in Addis Ababa. ⁷⁷ In October 1946, for instance, the Unionists and anti-Unionists carried on discussions ironing out their differences while Ethiopia's Liaison Officer, Colonel Negga Haile Selassie, was in Addis. The Unionists settled for a "conditional unity." Yet, the position was repudiated when the Colonel returned to Asmara and its chief proponent, Gebremeskel Woldu, the Secretary General of the Unionist Party, "resigned." ⁷⁸

Liberal Progressive Party (LPP)

Elites who were neither frightened by Ethiopia's agents nor corrupted by its money formed the only independent party in *Kebessa* - the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP). Their goal was to patch Eritrea and Tigray together to create an independent "Tigray-Tigrignie" state with the slogan "Eritrea for Eritreans":

The geographic position, its culture, its history and its trading are a clear proof that Tigray is part of Eritrea — as it was before the Italian occupation of 1889 and in the years 1935-1945. ⁷⁹

The LPP argued that before the advent of Italian colonialism, Tigray and Eritrea used to be a unit of the "Land of Agazi" or "Nation of Agazi" or "Tigray-Tigrignie" and when Italy occupied Ethiopia (1936-41), the "two sisters" that had been separated for fifty years were reunited.⁸⁰ For them it was legitimate that the two should be reunited in an independent "Tigray-Tigrignie."

The leaders of the LPP, who advocated the creation of a "Greater Tigray" state, were quite familiar with the need for a defined social space for their nation-to-be. A nation, after all, is a territorial conception.⁸¹ Thus they had a compact territory in mind with a well-defined boundary when they pleaded with the victors of World War II for the independence of their "historic land", their "homeland" — "Tigray Tigrignie":

Eritrea which trusts in the fairness of the Great Powers, is anxiously waiting for the proclamation of its INDEPENDENCE with the consequent annexation of the Tigray territory, including territory between the Taccazze river and the stream Ala, the territories of Tselemti, Ulcait and Zeghedie, the latter [the last three] being populations of Tigray origins.⁸²

The Tigrayan Kinfolk and the Amhara "Others": The *Kebessa* elites of the LPP bitterly accused the Amhara of letting Italy amputate the *Mereb Mellash* (Beyond the Mereb) from the rest of the trans-Mereb. Pleading with the "Big Four" against unity with Ethiopia they stated that it was Menelik of Shoa who "sold us to the Italians and he accepted a price for us. You cannot claim goods or materials which you already sold."⁸³

Unlike some of the Unionists who had a romantic view of Ethiopia, the LPP were a lot more familiar with the nitty gritty of the Amhara political machinations. By lambasting the Amhara monopoly of power, they praised Emperor Yohannes's federal form of rule. They argued that Yohannes did not rule by putting people from "Tigray-Tigrignie" all over Ethiopia. Instead, he crowned chiefs such as Menelik of Shoa and Teklehaimanot of Gojjam as kings of their respective regions.

Unlike the Amhara, Yohannes of "Tigray-Tigrignie" believed in power-sharing.⁸⁴

Further, it was a popular belief in Eritrea that some type of contacts existed between the LPP and the Tigrayan feudal elites, particularly *Degiat* Haile Selassie Gugsa and *Ra'esi* Seyoum Mengesha. The latter was believed to have been working for Tigrayan independence from the Amhara hegemonic rule. These popular perceptions in Eritrea were further reinforced by the 1943 *Weyane* insurgency against the Amhara regime.⁸⁵

Identification with Tigray and aversion to the Amhara rule was, therefore, the hallmark of the LPP. Thus, when Wolde-ab Woldemariam was castigated as a Tigrayan⁸⁶ who did not have any right to meddle in the Eritrean affairs by his arch rival the Unionist Tedla Bairu, not only did he strongly defend his Tigrayan-ness but the right of every Tigrayan to express opinions on Eritrean affairs as well. He underscored the oneness of the trans-Mereb "Tigray-Tigrignie" by invoking Yohannes IV and Alula "who made wonderful history with their blood" in Eritrea.⁸⁷

Sense of Modernization: The primordial attachment they had with Tigray aside, the LPP clearly felt they were more advanced than the Ethiopians with whom they did not want to be united:

Eritrea, having been for 60 years under the Italian Government, feels herself to be much superior and developed in general than Ethiopia, and, therefore, Eritrea wants to carry on and not to throw in her lot immediately to a country that is still in a primitive state. In the present situation an immediate annexation to Ethiopia would mean going back a hundred years.⁸⁸

The LPP argued Ethiopia was ill-prepared to administer Eritrea whose modern infrastructures would be dismantled just as

The roads, buildings, farms, factories, electric power-stations, aqueducts and centers established by the Italians in Ethiopia are now in ruins, having been in most

cases, destroyed by the natives. Then how can one believe that Ethiopia can support Eritrea?⁶⁹

Citing the dismal economic conditions in Tigray, the LPP said Eritreans would face a similar fate should they join Ethiopia. They also cautioned that they might be forced to lose their distinct cultural identity as the Tigrayans had:

It is not only the government of Tigray that had disappeared, but we have heard recently that the Tigrigna language is also disappearing in the Tigray. We are sorry that the government of Tigray has been lost, and that consequently the language is going to be lost. No government should compel people to lose their original language ...⁷⁰

They saw nothing attractive about joining with Ethiopia. Instead, they began to foresee the prices they were going to pay politically, economically and culturally if they were to be united with Ethiopia. Lest independence was implausible, they preferred to see themselves and Tigray (which would split from Ethiopia) remain under a U.N. trusteeship. It was this attitude that the British governor of Eritrea observed:

They hate the Amharic rule of the present Shoan dynasty; and they prefer the enormously higher standards of a European administration. Many, perhaps most, would wish to combine gratification of their very real sense of solidarity with the Tigrai with continuance of the blessings of civilized rule and of safeguarding the progress made on the Eritrean plateau, but not made in the Tigrai.⁹¹

The Independence Bloc and Trans-Mereb Nationalism

The trans-Mereb nationalists were aware of the need for a defined territorial and social space which would characterize the nation-to-be. The "homeland" would be the cradle of ances-

tors, the source of unique cultures, the repository of historic memories and heroism where the glorious achievements of forefathers are stored.⁹² This was what the historical arguments that appeared later in the Independence Bloc's mouthpiece, *Hanti Ertra* edited by Wolde-ab, highlighted. The Independence Bloc, a group of six political parties, was chaired by the president of the LPP, Ra'esi Tessema Asberom. The goal stated:

A country [should belong] to its people. Eritrea for Eritreans; Africa for Africans; Asia for Asians. Yes, that is the only yearning and ultimate goal of the Independence Bloc ... [We] are begging, suffering and dying to see a house return to its owner, a country go to its own people. This kind of begging is only too familiar to the world and the world community.⁹³

The Eritrean house which they wanted to see returned to its rightful owners is not spelled out. If the notion of "Eritrea for Eritreans" stated here is the one that Ra'esi Tessema's LPP upheld, then the house they were seeking to be masters of was the trans-Mereb "Tigray-Tigrignie." This is also what we learn from many articles that appeared in the Bloc's mouthpiece *Hanti Ertra*. They presented "Tigray-Tigrignie" as the historical homeland which was regarded as the cradle of their people and the repository of their memories. For instance, Gebreigzi Andom, in his article "Goals of a free and independent Eritrea ...," discussed why Tigrayans should not be regarded as foreigners. After stating "Eritrean history is Tigrayan history," he concluded that both Eritreans and Tigrayans are the same people with the same "language, history and ethnicity."⁹⁴

In *Hanti Ertra*, the trans-Mereb nationalist views of the LPP are dominant. For the LPP and its notion of "Eritrea for Eritreans," Eritrea and "Tigray-Tigrignie" were synonymous. Numerous articles took this equation for granted. For instance, the article that announced the bomb attack on Wolde-ab was titled: "Resurrection of Mr. Wolde-ab Woldemariam, Martyr of Eritrea (Tigray-Tigrignie)."⁹⁵ Here the goals of Wolde-ab and those of Eritrea are equated with those of "Tigray-Tigrignie."

A strong plea for the independence of "Tigray-Tigrignie" was made in Alemayehu Alula's article: "If there was not history, secrets would never be revealed." Historical grievances are outlined against the Shoan Amhara to counter Ethiopia's claim of Eritrea. "Our country," "Eritrea," "Tigray-Tigrignie" and "Nation of Agazi" were interchangeably used. Menelik of Shoa was lashed out for betraying his "master" Yohannes and dividing Tigray into two, giving *Mereb-Mellash* to the Italians. The division of the trans-Mereb was lamented: "As a result, though one soul with Tigray, we have been split for sixty years under the yoke of slavery." After tracing historical grievances, the author concluded by stressing the importance of history: "Independence that is supported by and based on history will have a solid foundation."⁹⁶

The Quest for a Common Heritage: A nation creates a social bond among its people by providing a repertoire of shared symbols and traditions. Members are reminded of their common heritage, kinship and heroism giving them a sense of common identity.⁹⁷ This was precisely what the *Kebessa* elites were doing in the 1940s by exalting Yohannes and Alula as heroes. In addition to history, a map of "Tigray-Tigrignie" or "Nation of Agazi," as it was named, was made and presented as a symbol of their identity.

In the process of self-definition and self-location which is key to national identity, nations also seek aspirations and sentiments that bind them together.⁹⁸ It was in this spirit of solidarity with their kinfolk south of the Mereb that the *Kebessa* elites sympathized with the *Weyane* insurgency (to be discussed later) and were pained by the manner of its suppression. The nation-to-be, "Tigray-Tigrignie," had "sacred centers" such as Axum for historical and spiritual pilgrimage.

Kebessa elites highlighted their historical grievances against the Amhara who, in *Hanti Ertra*, were presented as people "who cannot even administer themselves, leave alone to administer others."⁹⁹ Nor were they regarded as people who had the moral right to claim the *Mereb Mellash* that they sold to the Italians for an "insignificant" benefit,¹⁰⁰ a region Yohannes used to regard as precious as the "iris of his eye."¹⁰¹ By present-

ing the Amhara as the "worst enemies of the people of Tigray-Tigrignie,"¹⁰² activists warned Eritreans not to substitute white colonialists with Amhara oppressors. They made calls for Tigray and Eritrea to work together for independence.¹⁰³

"Tigray-Tigrinie" Nationalism and the *Weyane*

While the movement of "Tigray-Tigrignie" minimally affected the people south of the Mereb, it was well received in Eritrea where it started and where political freedom permitted people to express their views. In fact, some still have a fond memory of the whole notion of "Tigray Tigrignie":

I take pride in it. All the people who live in the region north of the Tekezze [River] speak the same language. We are one people with the same fate ... It is, indeed, a ticklish question [to be asked how I feel about 'Tigray-Tigrignie']. From the very beginning when the Eritrean independence struggle started in the 1940s, I was one of the founders of the movement for the creation of a common state for both Eritrea and Tigray - "Agazi Nation" - from *Alewaha Mellash* and the Tekezze. The main founders of "Eritrea for Eritreans," however, were people such as *Ra'esi* Tessema, and Wolde-ab Wolde-Mariam joined later.¹⁰⁴

Kebessa elites whose slogan was "Eritrea for Eritreans" watched with sadness the suffocation of the Tigrayan aristocracy, whom they regarded as their own rightful leaders, into political impotence. They lamented the confinement of *Ra'esi* Seyoum, the grandson of Yohannes IV, to Addis Ababa. They considered him as the one who could have been the leader of "Tigray-Tigrignie". Their identification with Tigray was so profound that they mourned the death of members of the Tigrayan aristocracy.¹⁰⁵

The *Kebessa* were well familiar with the 1943 *Weyane* insurgency in eastern Tigray and even today they remember more about the *Weyane* than do the civilians of western Tigray. *Kebessa* elites strongly sympathized with the Tigrayans when they were

bombed by British planes during the suppression of the *Weyane*. One article in *Hanti Ertra* blasted the "fascist Shoan regime" for carrying out a

barbaric bombardment on our Tigrayan brethren. Since the dawn of history, the Shoans have always thought in terms of hurting those of us who are Tigrinya-speaking.¹⁰⁶

In this article, the atrocities committed by the Amhara regime to suppress the *Weyane* is invoked to argue against unity with Ethiopia. A longer and more elaborate article also appeared on the Tigrayan "Revolution" and how it was quelled by the "Satanic Shoan bombardment" of civilians. Here it was argued that the "barbaric" Shoans would do to Eritrea what they did to Tigray should it fall into their hands.¹⁰⁷

However, there is no tangible evidence to show that there was a relationship between the two movements across the Mereb. Eritrean informants do not see a link between the trans-Mereb nationalism in Eritrea and the *Weyane* in Tigray. They concur with the general perception that the latter had the objective of "reinstating the royal family of Tigray and precisely of Johannes IV."¹⁰⁸ A *Kebessa* informant said this was the message of the popular song that praised the leader of the *Weyane*:

Haile Mariam the youthful
Today's bandit, next year's king.¹⁰⁹

Haile Mariam Ne'usie
Lomie shifta ne'ameta negusie.

Most Eritreans lacked a common sense of identity. Even the most enlightened of them had a sense of identity that was fluid. Wolde-ab, for instance, was at first a strong Ethiopian. Then he became an advocate of "Tigray-Tigrignie" nationalism and ended up being an Eritrean (minus Tigray) nationalist. This undeveloped sense of identity favored Ethiopia's easy intervention.

Tigray: Struggle for an Assertive Identity

The death of Yohannes in Metemma in 1889 and the concomitant amputation of the *Mereb-Mellash* from trans-Mereb Tigray, and the ascendancy of Menelik's Shoa to political primacy made Tigray weak. Being a death blow to the political potency of the Tigrayan chiefs, the creation of Eritrea "consummated their post-Metemma disarray."¹¹⁰ The post-Metemma decade (1889-1899) "turned out to be an antithesis of the peace, stability, political and military power as well as of the social and economic flourishing of the Yohannis era."¹¹¹ Thereafter, the Amhara imposed their hegemony on the Tigrayan society. Tigrayan feudal elites were systematically strangled into political irrelevance. Even the legendary war hero, Alula, once considered the best African war strategist and tactician,¹¹² was reduced to a mere governor of a small region in western Tigray. Having prevailed over the relatively mighty forces of Italy, Mahdist Sudan and Egypt, he lost his life in a minor skirmish against a local rival, *Ra'esi* Hagos Tefari, on February 15th 1897.¹¹³

The Rise of the Absolutist State: The ascendancy of the Shoa Amhara coincided with the aggressive intrusion of the international market system in the region. As a result, state power metamorphosed into centralism and absolutism. The Amhara absolutist state with its standing army, bureaucracy, taxation, codified law and an early form of market system began to undermine the feudal nobility's social and political source of power. Yet, it did not abandon them completely. By accommodating both the feudal nobility and the emergent middle class, it managed to retain an unchallenged autonomy becoming the best beneficiary of the new socio-economic changes.¹¹⁴

Amhara Hegemony: The political power of the Amhara was accompanied by their cultural hegemony. Tigrayans were being pressurized, directly and indirectly, to abandon their culture and to despise their own language. Power and prejudice were reinforcing one another, to use Lauren's phrase.¹¹⁵ Suddenly, the Tigrayan emperor of Ethiopia, Yohannes IV, was made a villain.

According to the Italian-educated Amhara intellectual of the first decade of the century, Professor Afework Gebreyesus, Yohannes was a usurper and an illegitimate monarch. Menelik was exalted as a legitimate person who deserved to be on the throne of his ancestors. His ascendancy to the throne, which followed the death of Yohannes in 1889, was applauded as "the return of the Solomonic throne to its rightful place from a long exile."¹¹⁶ Being ideological weapons expounded by intellectuals to legitimize the hegemony of a dominant ethn^{ie},¹⁷ such arguments painted Ethiopia as having been pulled by Menelik out of the hell it had been suffering under Yohannes:

Contrary to the times of Yohannes, all suffering disappeared during the reign of the magnanimous Menelik. Darkness receded, being replaced by dawn. The soldier and the peasant, the rich and the poor became equals, spoke to each other as equals. Everyone was happy, relaxed and slept the sleep of the world.¹¹⁸

The same Amhara intellectual exonerated Menelik from all the deals he had made with Ethiopia's enemies such as the Egyptians. He claimed the Egyptians had promised Menelik they would leave Ethiopia once they defeated Yohannes, "who had illegitimately usurped the throne."¹¹⁹ Further, the Professor defended Menelik's secret deals with the Italians to attack Yohannes's Ethiopia. That Menelik traded the *Mereb-Mellash* for arms was also presented as a legitimate step to regaining his rightful throne.¹²⁰

Menelik's army is portrayed as a harmless force, in marked contrast to that of the Tigrayan army which pillaged and foraged as badly as locusts would:

Wherever it [the Amhara army] marches and stays, the land becomes greener the very next morning. In contrast, the Tigrayan army, like locusts, was devastating the land wherever it stayed.¹²¹

The stigmatization of Tigrayans as locusts is repeated when the Professor claimed that during the reign of Yohannes, "the

Ethiopian people were yearning for the vanishing of the locust Tigrayans and the coronation of Menelik."¹²² He lamented the "razing" of Gojjam by the "locust Tigrayans."¹²³ Further, Afework added the stigma of "poverty" to Tigrayans when he said "Wild animals who are scattered by the acrid smell of gunpowder and Tigrayans who are dispersed by poverty are one and the same."¹²⁴

The Professor did not stop at devaluing the Tigrayan people, their emperor and their homeland. He continued lashing out at the "abrasive" nature of their language, Tigrinya. When Tigrayans speak "in their language which lacerates the throat," the Amhara intellectual claimed, "pregnant women undergo miscarriage while the breast of women who just had delivery dries out."¹²⁵

Professor Afework's brusque assault on everything Tigrayan—the people, their leaders such as Yohannes and Alula who accomplished heroic deeds for Ethiopia, their land and their language—was an obvious rush to suffocate Tigrayan identity. It was a desire to hasten the superimposition of Amhara hegemony over the politically and economically weakened Tigrayans and a violent quest for their spontaneous consent, in the Gramscian sense,¹²⁶ to cultural, economic and political subordination.

Politically emaciated, war-torn and stricken by the 1888-9 Great Famine, post-Yohannes Tigray was a devastated region. Since power and prejudice reinforce one another, it was not surprising that Tigrayans were exposed to Amhara belittling ideologies and prejudices such as those of Afework Gebreyesus.¹²⁷

According to the German and Austrian-trained young Tigrayan intellectual of the time, Gebrehiwet Baykedagne (c.1885-1918), Tigray under Menelik was completely devastated. Left only with ruins of its old greatness, Gebrehiwet stated, Tigrayan youth did not have the homeland of their forefathers. He held the Tigrayan feudalists mainly responsible for devastating their region by fighting against each other. As such, the Tigrayan intellectual took issue with the popular Tigrayan perception of blaming the Amhara and their emperor, Menelik, for all their miseries. However, he did not leave the Emperor

without any blemish. In his balanced and modest style, he criticized him for not regarding the Tigrayans as his people and watching them perish. In fact, he blamed him for pardoning and rewarding the very Tigrayan bandits who had been razing the villages.¹²⁸

Centrifugal Tigrayan Elites: The loss of power to the Amhara ushered in "Tigray's perennial disaffection."¹²⁹ The disgruntled Tigrayan feudalists who were relegated to the periphery, both politically and geographically, were now entertaining centrifugal tendencies and struggling to maintain a fast-waning autonomy. They had a limited success and as late as 1974, Tigray enjoyed some residue of its long-gone autonomy, a privilege enjoyed by none of the other administrative regions.

However, nothing stopped the Amhara hegemony from creeping into Tigray at every level, including forceful domination or dynastic marriage. With increasing absolutism, the power of Tigrayan feudal elites was fast waning. Yet, they were still a power to be reckoned with. The state could ill afford to abandon them in favor of the nascent and minuscule, but more usable, middle class that was the product of Ethiopia's limited exposure to the market system.

Unlike in Western Europe where the dominant ethnies incorporated outlying regions using the new bureaucratic state,¹³⁰ the new Amhara bureaucratic state was not that developed until the 1970s. Thus, the state pursued a control mechanism of "surveillance," "segmentation" and "cooptation" in Tigray similar to that employed by the Israelis with the Arabs.¹³¹

Since the death of Yohannes IV, the Tigrayan aristocrats had all been concentrated in Tigray and competed and fought against one another for primacy. The district of Agame, for instance, was divided between Sebhat and Hagos Tefari. The latter was also given the district of Tembien. Alula had Western Tigray - Adua, Axum and Shire. The ecclesiastical office of *Nebru'ed* of Axum went to an Amhara, Woldegiorgis, who would also be a watchman over all the Tigrayan chiefs.¹³²

The confirmation of *Ra'esi* Mengesha, the son of Yohannes IV, as governor of Tigray by Menelik was contingent upon his acceptance of an Amhara representative in the region, a certain

Degiat Meshesha Worqe.¹³³ Even after the Italian defeat in 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie was only willing to reinstate *Ra'esi Seyoum Mengesha*, grandson of Yohannes IV, as governor of Tigray on condition that Seyoum accepted the Emperor's trusted agent, *Degiat Gebrehiwet Meshesha*, as governor of Adua.¹³⁴

Attempts were made to coopt Tigrayan elites by political rewards and marriage with the royal family. In the early 1930s, for instance, the Emperor wed the teenager Crown Prince Asfawosen with Woleteisrael, the widowed mother of two children and daughter of Western Tigray governor, *Ra'esi Seyoum*. He also wed his 14-year-old daughter Princess Tsehai to the 32-year-old *Degiat Haile Selassie Gugsu*, governor of Eastern Tigray and great-grandson of Yohannes IV.¹³⁵

Although "Tigray showed the emperor at the peak of his manipulative skills,"¹³⁶ marriage was not always an effective control mechanism. At face value, it appeared to have diluted not only the distinct sense of identity of the Tigrayan aristocracy, but also their oft-lamented claims to have lost power to the Amhara. It only achieved minimal success as in the case of transforming the provincial palace in Mekelle into an island repository of the Amhara culture, symbols and values. The royal wives came with Amhara entourages who transplanted their language and culture among the Tigrayans. From this nucleus, Amhara cultural values were radiating to the district ruling cliques.

Marriage diplomacy failed to guarantee the incorporation of the Tigrayan aristocracy, much less the Tigrayan masses, within Amhara-dominated Ethiopia. For instance, with the death of his young wife, Haile Selassie Gugsu ceased to be the son-in-law of the Emperor, rendering marriage diplomacy mute. Thus, far from being a "comprador," he reemerged as the arch rival of the Amhara, and when the Italians invaded Ethiopia he switched to their side. After the Italian defeat, he served the British who later exiled him to Seychelles. They understood he was opposed "to the Shoan usurpation of the empire after King John's death."¹³⁷

Nor did the marriage alliance prevent Seyoum from acting contrary to the Amhara wishes. The grievances of Tigrayan

aristocrats for being relegated to the periphery of the political process were just too profound. After the departure of the Italians in 1941, Seyoum toyed with the idea of an independent Tigray under British Protection, something that caused anxiety to the Emperor.¹³⁸ Seyoum went to Addis at the insistence of the Emperor and was instructed not to return to Tigray. The Emperor feared Tigrayan separatism and was well aware of the possibility of movement to reunite Tigray and Eritrea.¹³⁹ Seyoum's enforced absence was believed to have caused growing unrest in the region.¹⁴⁰ This worried the British who were then in charge of maintaining peace in the area. Since they believed that the return of Seyoum as governor of Tigray would calm the people, they gave the Emperor an ultimatum, delivered by T.R. Brackley, an assistant to the British Commander-in-Chief:

I am directed to state that the Commander-in-Chief will regard any further delay to despatch Ras Seyoum as a deliberate refusal on your majesty's part to cooperate in matters affecting military operations, and that such refusal will be reported to His Britannic Majesty's Government, with the recommendation that the whole of the territory North of Wollo Province (i.e. Tigray) be placed under complete and direct British Military administration now, and remain a reserved area ...¹⁴¹

The Emperor's fear of Tigrayan separatism was not a baseless paranoia. As stated earlier, although the "Tigray-Tigrignie" nationalism was mushrooming in Eritrea, it did also have its adherents south of the River Mereb, particularly the disgruntled Tigrayan elites such as Seyoum Mengesha and Haile Selassie Gugsa. According to the British governor of Eritrea, Longrigg, the notion of a United Tigray under a temporary British or some other foreign guidance was held by leaders in Ethiopia's Tigray:

It represents a reaction against rule of misrule there by the present Shoan dynasty and its unpopular officials, and it is believed that descendants of Negus Johannes (King John) are leaders of this school of thought ...¹⁴²

From the Seychelles, Haile Selassie Gugsä was reported to have established a channel of communication with people from his ex-governorship of Eastern Tigray where the *Weyane* insurgency was brewing. Living in Asmara prior to his exile, Haile Selassie Gugsä was also blamed by the Emperor for inciting the insurgency.¹⁴³ Indeed, he used to disseminate the propaganda that upon his return he would rule over an independent Tigray. And some *Weyane* leaders fought for his cause.¹⁴⁴ The Emperor was therefore worried and requested the British to stop Haile Selassie Gugsä from communicating with the outside world. For the British officials, "This request was understandable, as it was reported that he [Haile Selassie Gugsä] was in contact with the Emperor's enemies."¹⁴⁵

The Weyane: Haile Selassie Gugsä's channel of communication appears to have been real. Among the leaders of the *Weyane*, *Degiat* Kinfe and *Degiat* Teferi Tedla were his men.¹⁴⁶ In fact, one of the deputy leaders of the *Weyane* was believed to be his own son.¹⁴⁷ Even the mere perception that he was in touch with the *Weyane* must have been an adequate energizing force during the insurgency. However, an order from the office of Winston Churchill forbade him from communicating with the outside.¹⁴⁸

In any case, the absence of the two hereditary rulers of Tigray from power was effectively manipulated as a rallying-cry by the disgruntled feudal gentry who, as will be discussed later, opposed the loss of their regional autonomy. The newly-installed regime in Addis imposed new taxes and tried to bring the region within the orbit of its centralized administration, denying the regional gentry their source of power. These developments appeared to have created the climate for an insurgency like the *Weyane* which began in Wajirat but quickly engulfed eastern Tigray.

Between May and October 1943 the insurgents marched in victory. On May 22 alone, the expeditionary force under the loyalist governor of Enderta, *Degiat* Abbay Kahsai, was defeated near Enda Mekoni with about four hundred casualties. In September, the military garrison of Quiha was besieged and the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle fell to the insurgents.¹⁴⁹

The insurgency so seriously threatened the Amhara power base in Tigray that the Emperor asked the British for monetary to meet the expenses of suppressing it.¹⁵⁰ He also asked Britain and the U.S. for fighter planes and other military equipment.¹⁵¹ The British fulfilled the Emperor's request. Their Bisley fighter planes from the R.A.F. in Aden bombed Eastern Tigray with 40 pound anti-personnel bombs, suppressing the uprising. There was "heavy rebel casualty." From the army 200 were killed, 375 wounded and 33 missing. From the British side one military officer was killed, one R.A.F. officer crashed and was killed, two military mission officers were wounded and one R.A.F. officer crashed and was injured.¹⁵² While the emperor expressed his profound gratitude to the British,¹⁵³ the *Weyane* leaders must have been surprised by the extent of the British involvement because they had been claiming that the British were not going to support the Amhara regime with aircraft.¹⁵⁴

Trans-Mereb Fraternization: The British aerial bombardment of markets and residential areas was accompanied by a more horrifying mop-up operation by the army, which a British official aptly described as "primitive measures in the Tigray."¹⁵⁵ The way the *Weyane* was quelled also shocked many Eritreans who dubbed it "satanic," "barbaric," "Shoan fascism," etc.¹⁵⁶ They identified with the anguish of their kinfolk and argued against joining Ethiopia. For the British, the identification was natural:

The bonds of sentiment which naturally bind the Tigres of Ethiopia and Eritrea affected the younger generation in Eritrea in a way which must be expected in these days when the principles of self-determination are popular throughout the democratic world.¹⁵⁷

Further, Eritreans in Addis Ababa were viewed with suspicion after the *Weyane* and those in high-ranking government positions were removed immediately. Loyal servants such as Lorenzo Tazaz and Ephrem Tewoldemedhin were made ambassadors to Moscow and Washington, appointments Eritreans regarded as "obscure exile." This sense of being viewed with

suspicion was part of what made Eritreans in Addis prefer independence from Ethiopia.¹⁵⁸ Throughout all this period, both Tigrayans and the *Kebessa* identified with the Tigrayan aristocracy. For instance, irrespective of the perceived or real role he had in the *Weyane*, Haile Selassie Gugsa was regarded as a traitor by the Amhara for his collaboration with the Italian invaders. In Eritrea and Tigray, though, he was the beloved great-grandson of Emperor Yohannes. People sympathized with him and there was a strong opposition against his extradition when the British decided to hand him over to the Amhara from his exile in the Seychelles in 1946. In Eritrea, it was considered a breach of faith on the part of the British and in response to this popular feeling the British in Asmara pleaded with their superiors against the extradition:

Dejatch Damos Hagos affirms he was present when Brig. Kennedy Cook stated to Gugsä in the presence of Capt. Reich that no force would be used to make him return to Ethiopia ... this promise appears sufficiently valid to justify postponement of Gugsä's extradition to Ethiopia more particularly because moderate Eritrean opinion holds very strongly that his surrender would be breach of faith.¹⁵⁹

External Actors

Notwithstanding the lack of a pan-Eritrean common identity as well as the prevalence of terror, bribery and the Eritrean Coptic Church's abuse of power, the majority of Eritreans did not want unity with Ethiopia. In 1950, the U.N. Commission for Eritrea, consisting of Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa, which was delegated with the responsibility of on-the-ground investigation, was holding public hearings. Three delegates from each parish (*Adi*) were actually being hand-picked by parish chiefs (*mislenes*) to express the people's "preference." Their "desire" was whatever their *mislenes* wanted.¹⁶⁰ And yet, the Unionists were not the majority. Only 43% ended up preferring unity. Out of the 57% who opposed unity, 5% wanted to see the return of Italy. The remaining 52%

wanted either immediate independence, with or without Tigray, or a European trusteeship until the people prepared themselves for ultimate independence.¹⁶¹

Consequently, at some point in the late 1940s, the Amhara resigned to not getting Eritrea and were to be content with the port of Asseb. Another reason why Ethiopia stopped pressing its claim on Eritrea was the fear that Eritrea would unite with Tigray to split off from Ethiopia.¹⁶²

What mattered, ultimately, was not how the Eritreans and Tigrayans perceived themselves and their identity. It was whom the Western powers, particularly Britain and the U.S., supported that was decisive. While the pleading of the Amhara absolutist state for fighter planes with pilots as well as for financial assistance to suppress the *Weyane* was being considered in Washington, the British offered full cooperation, rendering U.S. backing superfluous.

On the Eritrean question, Winston Churchill had promised Emperor Haile Selassie in January 1945 that he was going to give Eritrea to Ethiopia.¹⁶³ The British Secretary of State also said in an internal meeting on July 2 1948, that Britain had to support Ethiopia's claim over Eritrea in order to get Ethiopia's cooperation in various British schemes in Africa such as the waters of the Nile.¹⁶⁴ Most decisive of all, however, were the U.S. interests in Eritrea. The Americans wanted to control the radio transmitting and receiving station known as Radio Marina. They were also interested in a Navy oil storage facility at Ras Dogan, Massawa.¹⁶⁵ And Ethiopia guaranteed the U.S. that its interests were going to be respected.¹⁶⁶ The U.S. Secretary of Defence was advised from the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that no hostile power had to be allowed any foothold in the region:

As to the nature of the rights in Eritrea, the Joint Chiefs of Staff would state categorically that the benefits now resulting from operation of our telecommunications center at Asmara ... [are] of high military importance to both the United States and Great Britain ... can be obtained from no other location in the entire Middle East

- Eastern Mediterranean area. Therefore, United States rights in Eritrea should not be compromised.¹⁶⁷

Accordingly, the National Security Council also advised the President that the U.S. had to support the cession of Eritrea to Ethiopia.¹⁶⁸ Thus, without consulting the Eritrean people, and without taking their sense of identity into consideration, it was decided to link Eritrea with Ethiopia by way of federation. The strong U.S. stand was supported by Britain and other Western countries. East European countries as well as some Latin American countries, however, opposed it. For instance, the Guatemalan delegate, Garcia Bauer, who had been a member of the U.N. fact-finding mission in Eritrea, opposed the federal link:

During our travels in Eritrea, we were able to see how important were the parties which form the Independence Bloc, and that experience convinced us that the great majority of the population oppose the idea of federation which the Ad Hoc [underlining sic] Political Committee approved.

Nor can my delegation agree that this so-called federation recommended by the Ad Hoc [underlining sic] Political Committee can be considered a compromise solution, or a well-balanced solution, as it has been called; but it is not up to us to reply to that argument. Time will answer those who make that assertion.¹⁶⁹

Another strong opponent of the federal link was Pakistan. The Pakistani delegate visited Seraye in the late 1940s and met a group of young people singing for independence. Prophetically, he told them that they could only earn their independence by

blood, not singing. When we asked him what he meant by blood, he told us 'if there are one thousand of you, five hundred will have to die so that the other five hundred can enjoy freedom and independence.'¹⁷⁰

Just as the British intervention with aerial bombardment of Eastern Tigray brought about the suppression of the *Weyane*,

so the U.S self-interest dictated Eritrea's fate. The head of the U.S. delegation to the U.N., John Foster Dulles, stated bluntly the rationale for the decision:

From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea basin and consideration of security and world peace makes it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally.¹⁷¹

Ultimately, the U.N. General Assembly adopted Resolution 390 A (V) on December 2, 1950, making Eritrea "an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown."¹⁷² Eduardo Anze Matienzo of Bolivia was the U.N. Commissioner charged with the task of drafting a constitution.

However, immediately following the U.N. decision there were serious doubts as to whether the so-called federation was even going to be implemented according to the spirit and letters of the U.N. resolution. Such serious doubts were particularly being aired by the Muslim League. In its nine point memorandum,¹⁷³ the League pleaded for some form of guarantee that Ethiopia would not abrogate the federation: "Will the Eritreans be allowed recourse to arbitration by the United Nations, in their capacity as inhabitants of a territory whose fate was decided and imposed by the said United Nations?"¹⁷⁴

Notes

1. Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. pp. 205-6.
2. Anthony Smith, *National Identity*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991. p. 14.

3. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963. pp. 1-12.
4. G. K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea, A Colony in Transition: 1941-52*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960. pp. 10-11. Trevaskis was British political advisor in Eritrea.
5. Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*.
6. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome. November 2 1982. See also Johannes Kolmodin, *Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega*. Upsala: Imprimerie K. W. Appelberg, [1912] 1915. par. 278.
7. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 1.
8. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941*. Uppsala, 1986. p. 4.
9. *Ibid.* p. 53.
10. Stephen Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945. p. 138. Longrigg was a British Governor of Eritrea (1942-44).
11. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*. p. 68.
12. Longrigg, 1945. p. 140.
13. Sir Duncan Cumming, "The U.N. Disposal of Eritrea," *African Affairs*. Vol. 52 # 207, 1953. Cumming was the last British Governor of Eritrea.
14. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1968. p. 39.
15. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*. p. 109.
16. Interview: Bashai Abraha Berhane (78), July 12, 1994. Mendefera.
17. "Observation on Italian East Africa, based on a report by an American, Miss Lillian Schoedler," American Consulate, Nairobi, to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. July 19, 1940. p. 15.
18. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2 1982. See also his bitter feelings towards the Italians for discouraging education in Eritrea in Despatch No. 361. American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington, D.C. March 20, 1947. In 1942, only 300 Eritrean children were receiving education in the Swedish Mission School as compared to 5000 Italian children attending private schools. See Occupied Enemy Territory Administration, Eritrea. Half-Yearly Report. Report IV. July 1-December 31, 1942. p. 38.

19. Report on Eritrea. Four Power Commission, 1948. Section V. Foreign Office 371-69361. p. 69.
20. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*. p. 67.
21. A British survey showed that there were only four Eritreans with high school education. Cumming, 1953. p. 133.
22. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 47.
23. On the issue of mutual exclusivity, Trevaskis reported that "The Italian district officer had usually been remote from the Eritrean. Few had made a practice of touring their districts or acquired more than a superficial knowledge of Eritrean customs and ways; during the fifty years of Italian rule less than a dozen had learned any Eritrean dialect." (Trevaskis, 1960. p. 32.)
24. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*. p. 122.
25. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2 1982; Similar interview by the EPLF in Orotta, October 1 1987. See also Kolmodin, [1912] 1915. par. 285.
26. Longrigg, 1945. p. 125; Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
27. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 29.
28. Interview: Bashai Gebreselassie - Amanuel (94). July 15, 1994, Mendefera; Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea*. pp. 136, 154.
29. Longrigg, 1945. p. 132.
30. Wolde-ab Woldemariam, Press Conference, Beirut, 1971.
31. Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960. p. 123.
32. Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976. p. 452.
33. B. Anderson, 1983.
34. Statement by the Chairman of the delegation of the Muslim League of Eritrea, made at the 55th meeting of the Ad Hoc Political Committee on 24th November 1950. UN General Assembly, 5th Session. AD HOC Political Committee. Agenda item 21(d) and (e).
35. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. July 3, 1947, p. 4.
36. Stephen Longrigg, "The future of Eritrea," *African Affairs*. Vol. 45, 1946. p. 122; See also Longrigg, 1945. p. 9.
37. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. November 28, 1946, p. 4.
38. Wolde-ab Woldemariam in *ibid*. In a letter to President

Franklin D. Roosevelt, a "foreigner" confirmed the oneness of Tigray and *Kebraska*: "Racially and culturally the populations of southern Eritrea and northern Abyssinia are similar as the people of Nebraska and Kansas ... They have more in common between them ... than the Tigre people of Eritrea have in common with the Barias and Cunamas in the Eritrean lowlands ..." Harold Courlander to the President, c/o The American Consulate, Asmara. Gura, Eritrea. March 22, 1943.

39. Cited in Gerard Chaliand, *Revolution in the Third World*. New York: The Viking Press, 1977. p. 71; See also Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*. Hong Kong: Penguin Books, 1987. p. 404.
40. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. May 29, 1947. p. 4.
41. Emerson, 1960. p. 92.
42. Wolde-ab Woldemariam in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. April 17, 1947. p. 4.
43. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. May 15, 1947. p. 4.
44. Clippings from the *Ethiopian Herald*, October 14 1944. Enclosure No. 3 to Despatch No. 291, November 28, 1944. American Minister, Addis Ababa, to the Department of State, Washington D.C.
45. Statement made by the Unionists to the Political and Security Committee of the General Assembly of the U.N. p. 12, n.d.
46. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 59.
47. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, EPLF, Orotta. September 6, 1987.
48. Despatch No. 25. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. September 3, 1952. Tedla Bairu also received an American car from the Emperor. See Despatch No. 57. To ordinary citizens, grain bribes were being given. See telegram No. 101030Z, October 10, 1949. American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. The Ethiopian Liaison Officer, Negga Haile Selassie, was also successful in bribing some anti-Unionist leaders such as Seyoum Me'asho. See telegram from the American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. No. 202. September 26, 1949.
49. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. December 4, 1947.
50. Interview: Sheikh Mohammed Adem Kiyar (62), July 12, 1994. Mendefera.

51. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. August 19, 1942.
52. Sylvia Pankhurst, *British Policy in Eritrea*. London: Walthamstow Press, 1953. p. 20.
53. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome. November 22, 1982 and in Orota, September 6, 1987.
54. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. March 31, 1949, p. 2. The British Governor of Eritrea, Brigadier Drew, believed that the Ethiopian Liaison Officer, Negga Haile Selassie, was behind the "political murder." See the telegram from the American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. No. 62. April 4, 1949. See also the report given by the Italian Ambassador in Washington D.C. to the State Department on December 12, 1949.
55. Interview: *Bashai* Abraha Berhane.
56. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 110.
57. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
58. Interview: An ex-*shifta*, *Shambel Bashai* Tesfamariam Asgedom (72), July 16, 1994. Mendefera.
59. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 59.
60. *Eritrean Annual Report for 1949* British Administration, Eritrea. Asmara, 31st December 1949. Copy # 113. p. 5.
61. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. May 4, 1950. p. 3.
62. Statement by the Moslem League ... November 21, 1950. p. 3.
63. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, EPLF, Orota, September 6, 1987. The Eritrean governor of Axum, *Nebru'ed* Gebremeskel played a pivotal role in the *shifta* movement in Eritrea. Perhaps partly because of what the *Nebru'ed* was doing, the people of Axum, whose secular as well as ecclesiastical sections he headed, were quite familiar with the 1940s Eritrean political climate and the activities of Wolde-ab Woldemariam.

Wolde-ab's Tigrayan parentage became a political issue on both sides of the Mereb. What Wolde-ab told his arch rival the Unionist Tedla Bairu, that his father was from "Adi Kilde near Axum," caught the attention of the ecclesiastical people in Axum. Perhaps for fear of losing Emperor Haile Selassie's favor or perhaps because of pressure from their own governor, the Unionist Eritrean *Nebru'ed*, the powerful Church community of Axum sought out the veracity of Wolde-ab's claim that his father was

from Adi Kilte. What was intriguing and what the church community overlooked was the fact that there were two Adi Kiltes - one a neighborhood in the town of Axum and another a parish in *Wereda* (sub-district) of Zana near the town of Axum and within *Awraja* (district) of Axum. Thus, as they could not trace Wolde-ab's father in Adi Kilte in the town of Axum, the Church community wrote to the Emperor informing him that Wolde-ab's claim was baseless [Interview: *Haleqa Sequar Abbay* (85), May 6, 1994. Axum]. Wolde-ab's claim that his father was from "Adi Kilte near Axum" was misconstrued as "Adi Kilte in Axum," something he did not say.

64. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969.
65. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, September 6, 1987.
66. "Addis Ababa Report," British Legation to the War Office, 19th May 1943. Foreign Office 371-35627.
67. Cipher Telegram I/84 730, G.O Commander-in-Chief to the War Office, February 18, 1943. Foreign Office 371-35626.
68. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 109.
69. "For a Loyal and Fair Application of the United Nations Resolution for Eritrea," Memorandum of the Muslem League in Eritrea to the Commissioner of the United Nations for Eritrea, H.E. Eduardo Anze Matienzo, October 10 1951. p. 13.
70. Interview: *Qeshi* Giday Gebremichael (72), July 14, 1994. Mendefera.
71. Interview: Captain Gebregiorgis Gebreigzi (74), July 12, 1994. Mendefera.
72. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 67.
73. Interview: *Bashai* Berhane Yihdego (75), July 14, 1994. Mendefera.
74. *Memhir* Habte Zeri'ae, "Ne Medri Ayehbula Sedri, Ne Risti Yewagala Anesti," *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. November 28th 1946. p. 2.
75. Interview: *Bashai* Gebreselassie Amanuel.
76. Wolde-Ab Woldemariam-Mariam, "Kab Meqdela nab Keren," *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. March 14, 1946, p. 4.
77. Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
78. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 74.
79. Memorandum of the Liberal Progressive Party in *The Four Power*

Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies: Report on Eritrea. 1948. Foreign Office 371-69365.

80. *Degiat* Abraha Tessema's speech, in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. March 13 1947. pp. 3-4. He was the son of *Ra'esi* Tessema Asberom, the President of the Liberal Progressive Party and Chairman of the Independence Bloc. The *Degiat* was a prominent trans-Mereb Tigray-Tigrignie nationalist in his own right.
81. Smith, 1991. p. 9.
82. Memorandum of the Liberal Progressive Party to the Inquiry Commission, Appendix 101, Foreign Office 371-69365.
83. Hearing: Statement by spokesman of the LPP to the Council of Foreign Ministers, Appendix 123, November 18, 1947. Foreign Office 371-69365.
84. *Degiat* Abraha Tessema, "*Teka'felti Ena*," *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*, December 20, 1945. p. 3.
85. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 63.
86. Wolde-ab's father was from the parish of Adi Kilte in the sub-district of Zana, Axum. His mother was from Shire in Western Tigray (see Tedla Bairu's article in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*, December 5, 1946. p. 2). When and why his Tigrayan parents immigrated to Eritrea is hard to establish. Population intermingling in the trans-Mereb was not unusual. During the Italian era, for instance, "landless immigrant families" from Tigray used to settle in *Kebessa* as *ma'ekalai aliet*, tenants entitled only to usufructuary rights of land on a non-hereditary basis (Trevaskis, 1960. p. 53; *Sera'at Adkeme Miliga'ie*, p. 6). However, since Wolde-ab's father had managed to climb the agrarian economic ladder to become a rich farmer in Seraye, it is highly likely that he immigrated across the Mereb sometimes in the 1880s, possibly as a member of Alula's entourage when Yohannes appointed the latter governor of *Mereb-Mellash* in 1876. In 1888, *Ra'esi* Alula loosened the tight hereditary *risti* (a land tenure system of usufructuary rights) by his famous and radical edict: "Man is free, land is tributary." Anyone who paid tribute on the land in his possession could have *risti* rights over it. This edict enabled the *ma'ekalai aliet* to become *risti*-holders (Nadel, 1946. p. 11). Unless Wolde-ab's father used this opportunity to become a *ristinya* (a *risti*-holder), there was no possibility he could have climbed the Seraye agrarian social ladder as a *ma'ekalai aliet* in a world where a per-

- son "does not possess his land but is possessed by it." Nadel, 1946. p. 1.
87. Wolde-ab Woldemariam "Beza'eba Ertra Kezareb Massel Zelewo De'a Menkon Yekewun," *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. November 28, 1946, p. 4; for Tedla Bairu's response see his article "Yedras Nab Kebur Hezbi Mereb Mellash. Abza Abayen Keberten Semyanawit Kefli Etopia Eteneber Etefetka Hezbay," December 5, 1946. p. 2.
 88. Memorandum of the LPP to the Inquiry Commission. Foreign Office 371-69365.
 89. *Ibid.* p. 8.
 90. Hearing: Statement by the spokesman of the LPP to the Inquiry Commission, November 18, 1947. Appendix 123. Foreign Office 371-69365.
 91. Longrigg, 1946. p. 1051.
 92. Smith, 1991. p. 9.
 93. *Hanti Ertra*. May 24, 1950. p. 1.
 94. Gebreizgi Andom, "Ilama Natsenet'n Harenet'n Ertra ..." *Hanti Ertra*. February 4, 1950. p. 2. He was one of the activists of the trans-Mereb Tigray-Tigrignie nationalism who were frequently writing particularly in *Hanti Ertra*.
 95. Alemayehu Alula, "Tensa'e Ato Wolde-ab Woldemariam Sema'ete Ertra (*Tigray Tigrignie*)," *Hanti Ertra*. February 4, 1950. p. 2. He was another activist of the trans-Mereb Tigray-Tigrignie nationalism.
 96. Alemayehu Alula, "Tarikh Entezayehlu Mestir Aymetagaltsen," *Hanti Ertra*. February 18, 1950, p. 2; See also his "Zelenayo Gizie Kehalef Serahna gen Heyaw Koynu Kenaber Eyu," *Hanti Ertra*. March 4, 1950, p. 4. He was one of the activists of Tigray-Tigrignie nationalism.
 97. Smith, 1991. pp. 16-17.
 98. Smith, 1991. pp. 11-17.
 99. Haile Gebretu, "'Nay Addis Ababa' Sereqa Tsehai..." *Hanti Ertra*. February 18, 1950. pp. 3-4. He was an activist of Tigray-Tigrignie nationalism.
 100. Solomon Seyoum, "Ha'de Hezben Ha'de Hegin," *Hanti Ertra*, February 18, 1950. p. 4. Another activist of the Tigray-Tigrignie nationalist movement.
 101. Kesete Berhan (An activist of the Tigray-Tigrignie nationalism), in *Hanti Ertra*. March 4, 1950, p.1.

102. Haile Gebretu, "'Sereqe Tsehai Tesfa'" *Ertra Be Igziabeher Hayli Tense'ie Berhi*, "' *Hanti Ertra*. March 4, 1950. p.2.
103. *Ibid.*; Mathias Hadgu, "*Keykoru Lebim Keytesebre Tsegin*," *Hanti Ertra*. March 4, 1950. p.4; and his article of March 25, 1950, p. 1: "*Ne Bariya Baryi'eu Keytkewen Natsenatika Ha'lu*." Another activist of Tigray-Tigrignie nationalism.
104. Interview: Yisaac Gebrehiwet (74), July 12, 1994. Mendefera.
105. See, for instance, the two articles by *Degiat Abraha Tessema* in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*: "*Abyi Hazen*" (November 15, 1945) & "*Teka'felti Ena*" (December 20, 1945).
106. Gebreigzi Andom, "Wegid Hasab Memeqial Adikan Barenat Shoa, ... " *Hanti Ertra*. February 18, 1950. p. 2.
107. Abbay Gebreabzgi, "Chihemi Betsayka Kelitses, Chihemika May le'kae", *Hanti Ertra*. April 8, 1950. p. 2. An activist of the Tigray-Tigrignie nationalism.
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111. Bairu Tafla, "The Political Crisis in Tegray, 1889-99," *Africa* (Roma). Vol. 34. # 1-2. 1979. p. 105.
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114. On the nature of the absolutist state, see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. London: Redwood Burn Limited, Trowbridge and Esher, 1974. p. 18.
115. Paul Lauren, *Power and Prejudice*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1988.
116. Afework Gebreyesus, *Dagmawi Atie Menelik*. Rome, 1909. p. 56.
117. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers, [1971] 1992. pp. 10-22.
118. Afework Gebreyesus, 1909. p. 4.
119. *Ibid.* p. 24.
120. *Ibid.*, p. 48; for a stark contrast, see the contemporary Eritrean, Blatta Gebreigziabher Gila Miriam, in Tekeste Negash, "No medicine for the bite of a white snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940." Uppsala. 1986.

121. Afework Gebreyesus, 1909. p. 26.
122. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
123. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
124. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
125. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
126. Gramsci, [1971] 1992. pp. 12-13.
127. More than eight decades later, the *Dergue* used the same denigrating and prejudicial propaganda: "The TPLF carries hunger with it. It brought hunger with it to northern Shoa, a region that had never known hunger before. Like locusts, the TPLF lands on green land and devastates the region." [Sunday Radio Broadcast from Armed Forces, 24/6/83 Ethiopian Calendar March 3(?) 1991]. Again during the post-*Dergue* era, Professor Asrat Woldeyes, President of the All Amhara People's Organization, an opposition group to the regime, said: "If locusts were to emerge in Eritrea or worms were to appear in Tigray, they would have claimed the All Amhara People's Organization was responsible." [24/5/86 Ethiopian Calendar, January 31,(?) 1993].
128. Guebre-Heywet Baykedagne, *L'Empereur Menelik & L'Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: United Printers, [1912] 1993. p. 36; on the devastation of Tigray, see Bairu Tafla, 1979.
129. John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. p. 63.
130. Smith, 1991. p. 55.
131. Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980. pp. 76-77.
132. Bairu Tafla, 1979. p. 125.
133. Afework Gebreyesus, 1909. p. 72; Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1986. p. 122.
134. Deputy Chief Political Officer, Addis Ababa, to the Chief Political Officer, Nairobi, War Office 230-16.
135. Erlich, 1986. pp. 139-140.
136. Clapham, 1988. p. 206.
137. "Record of Interview between the D.C.P.O. [Deputy Chief Political Officer, Brigadier Kennedy-Cooke] and Ras Haile Selassie Gugsu," Asmara. April 17, 1941. War Office 230-16.
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139. Chief Administrator Longrigg, BMA Eritrea, to the Chief Civil

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 141. T.R. Blackley, Assistant to the Deputy Chief Political Officer, AIDE-Memoir. War Office 230-16.
 142. Stephen Longrigg to Chief Civil Affairs Officer. October 12, 1944. War Office 230-168.
 143. Deputy Chief Political Officer. Addis Ababa, to Chief Political Officer, Nairobi. October 21, 1944. War Office 230-16.
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 145. Howe, Minister of the British Legation, to Foreign Minister, Eden. Addis Ababa, August 20, 1943. Foreign Office 371-35628; Telegraph from Howe to the Seychelles. September 3 1943. Foreign Office 371-35643.
 146. "Wajirat problem described by an informant at Addis Ababa, considered reliable," October 21, 1941. War Office 230-16.
 147. Addis Ababa Report from British Legation. # 13, October-November 1943, p. 6. Foreign Office 371-41467.
 148. P. Scrivener for Winston Churchill to the Foreign Office. March 29, 1943. Foreign Office 371-35643.
 149. See Gebru Tareke, 1991. pp. 105-118 on the course of the rebellion.
 150. Minister of the British Legation Howe to British Foreign Minister Eden. August 20, 1943. Foreign Office 371-35628.
 151. "Request of Ethiopian Government for Airplanes and Army Equipment, and Its Connection with Unrest in Northern Ethiopia," American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington. (September 29, 1943) 884.24/142.
 152. Minister of the British Legation, Howe, Addis Ababa Report. # 13. October and November 1943. Foreign Office 3371-41467. p. 6.
 153. Report from the British Legation. #13, October-November, 1943. Foreign Office 371-41467.
 154. *Ibid*.
 155. Cited in Gebru Tareke, 1991. p. 119.
 156. See, for instance, Abbay Gebreabzgi, op.cit.

157. British Military Administration of Eritrea, *Annual Report*. January 1-December 31, 1944. p. 8.
158. British Legation, Addis Ababa, to British Military Administration, Asmara. June 19, 1944. 148/7/44.
159. Cipher message from BMA to MEDEAST For CIVIL Affairs, August 15 1946. War Office 230-126.
160. Interview: *Bashai* Gebreselassie Amanuel and others; See also Trevaskis, 1960. pp. 88-89.
161. Chief Administrator Cumming to the Foreign Office, London 1948, War Office 230-219.
162. Chief Administrator F.G. Drew to Chief Civil Affairs Officer, Middle East Land Forces, March 30, 1948. Foreign Office 371-69353.
163. A letter from Wheeler B. Preston to the British Information Services, New York September 28, 1948. Foreign Office 371-69367.
164. Foreign Office Minutes July 20, 1948. Foreign Office 371-69354.
165. R. Mason, Political Adviser's Office, British Military Administration, Asmara to Ernest Bevin, Member of Parliament, October 23, 1948. Foreign Office 371-69445.
166. See Minutes of the First Meetings Between Lieutenant General Bolte, Personal Representative of the U.S. President, and Officials of the Imperial Ethiopian Government. June 13th 1951. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Addis Ababa.
167. William D. Leahy, Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces to the Secretary of Defence, August 5, 1948.
168. NSC 19/5, Copy # 43, August 4, 1949.
169. U.N. Official Records of the General Assembly, 5th Session Vol. 1. 1950. p. 54.
170. Interview: *Sheikh* Mohammed Adem Kiyar, op. cit.
171. Cited in Bereket Habte Selassie, *Eritrea and the United Nations*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1989. p. 37.
172. Article 3, *Constitution of Eritrea*, (Prepared by the United Nations Commissioner), p. 9.
173. The Nine Points were:
 - I. An Absolutely autonomous Eritrean Government
 - II. A special flag for Eritrea
 - III. No representative of the Emperor of Ethiopia
 - IV. A separate federal government and constitution

V. No confusion between the Federal Government and the Ethiopian Government.

VI. Equal representation of Ethiopians and Eritreans in federal organs.

VII. The Federation between Ethiopia and Eritrea shall have a new name.

VIII. A national flag for the Federation, different from the ones of Ethiopia and Eritrea to be agreed upon by the two interested Governments.

IX. A new currency for the entire area of the Federation.

174. Muslim League Memorandum, 1951. p. 11

EN ROUTE TO INSURGENCY



Eritreans Meet the Amhara (1952-1962)

During the turbulent 1940s, Eritreans knew the fate of their country was going to be decided by external forces - the U.N. and the "Big Four" who won World War II. They also believed the "verdict", as it was popularly called, could not be contested.

An article that appeared in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta* on June 26, 1947, was a snapshot of the helplessness that suffused the Eritrean political climate. In this article, a certain Yoseph Mebrahtu compared Eritreans with the Germans who were anxiously awaiting the outcome of the Nuremberg trials. Imploring the "Big Powers" to give Eritreans a fair "verdict," the writer resigned to saying "May God help you make a fair decision."

This does not, however, mean that Ethiopia's money and terror did not have any role in the course of events. In fact, it was Ethiopia's heavy-handed intervention in corrupting prominent figures and physically eliminating opponents of unity that prevented the rise of a strong independence party with a solid mass base. Terrorism forced many to desert the Independence Bloc and join the Unionist Party.¹ Otherwise, what mattered most was not the feud in the Eritrean political arena but the

squabbling in the U.N. which, dominated by the U.S. and its allies, decided the fate of Eritrea. East Europeans and others rejected federation. The Iraqi delegate, for instance, prophetically forewarned the dangers of such linkage:

The Eritrean people must themselves decide whether they want independence or federation with Ethiopia. We must not decide the fate of a people. We would be making a serious mistake if we were doing that. And there would be nothing to rectify our mistakes.²

On December 2, 1950, the U.N. General Assembly gave its "verdict" by passing Resolution 390 A (V) to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia. In 1952, the federal link was implemented, and at face value, the dust appeared to be settling.

Good Faith Rendezvouses Bad Faith

Strictly, "federation" is a misnomer to the arranged marriage between Ethiopia and Eritrea since there was no separate federal government. Ethiopia was given the federal authority. Only a so-called Imperial Federal Council, consisting of equal members from Eritrea and Ethiopia was established, supposedly to advise upon the common affairs of the federation.³

Prior to the passing of the Resolution, while the U.N. discussion on Eritrea was underway, terror continued in Eritrea, targeting anti-Union activists such as the prominent leader of the Independence Bloc, *Azmatch Berhe Gebrekidan*. He was assassinated on May 16, 1950.⁴

Another anti-Unionist leader, *Wolde-ab*, too, was quite literally living under the cloud of death. Hand grenades, shot guns and poisoning were used in attempts to kill him. At one point, death looked so imminent that he had to leave his home and family in the *Geza Kenisha* district of the capital, Asmara, for fourteen months and live in *Pensione Milano*, a hotel in Downtown Asmara. It was then that poisoning appeared the only feasible way to kill him.⁵ Yet, every attempt on his life, far from forcing him to abandon his stand, emboldened his principles. For instance, when he was released from hospital, surviving the

fourth attempt on his life, he wrote an open letter entitled "Polite Words of Greetings to the Honorable People of Eritrea." This article showed that the attempts on his life were pushing him to militancy and martyrdom. "If I had a hundred lives, let alone one," Wolde-ab vowed, "I would have happily sacrificed them for the sake of the beloved people of Eritrea."⁶

Others such as Ibrahim Sultan, who posthumously shares the prestigious title of "Father of Eritrea" with Wolde-ab, also struggled against any link with Ethiopia.⁷ Once the U.N. gave its "verdict" on Eritrea, though, both "Fathers of Eritrea" were among practically all Eritrean leaders who accepted Resolution 390 A (V). Despite their strong commitment to independence, they felt it was a resolution not to be contested. One exception was *Ra'esi* Tessema Asberom, Chairman of the Independence Bloc and President of the Liberal Progressive Party. He refused to accept the U.N. decision and told the British Governor: "The decision was a verdict given by the U.N. on Eritrea, never was it the choice of the people."⁸ He continued to be resentful even during the process of electing Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Eritrean Parliament under the federal arrangement. Having resigned himself to defeat, he said: "I wanted to say something; but I cannot. So I do not want to elect, nor to be elected."⁹ And he resigned from the parliament "for health reasons."¹⁰

Most Eritrean leaders, however, felt it was futile to challenge the U.N. decision. Ibrahim Sultan, in his capacity as Secretary General of the Independence Bloc, even started to send greetings to the Emperor.¹¹ Not only did he accept the "verdict," but he also pleaded with the people to work and struggle for the genuine implementation of the federation.¹²

Wolde-ab also accepted the federation which had been his own political vision before terrorist acts converted him to complete independence. Although he firmly believed that Eritrea belonged to Ethiopia, he used to argue that Eritrea and Tigray had to be autonomous under overall Ethiopian sovereignty. According to Consul William H. Beech, Wolde-ab favored federation but resented the imposition of "Amhara officialdom" and the inefficiency of the "Amhara ruling race" on Eritrea. He had a deep-seated distrust of Amhara "carpetbagging."¹³ Once

the U.N. gave its "verdict," he pleaded with the people to accept it:

I have faith in the kindness and capability of the U.N. delegates. It is constructive to support them in their endeavor to implement the program and spirit of the federation. If I do not support them and do something different, it would be destructive.¹⁴

Eritrean leaders were now willing to work for the implementation of the federation "according to its letters and spirit." For Wolde-ab, federation was a lesser evil than unconditional unity — a matter of "preferring to embrace thorny shrubs to falling off a cliff" (*enkab ze'tsadeq qon'taftafa ye'haquf*).¹⁵

Ethiopia, for its part, promised to respect the "verdict." During the voting on the draft resolution in the U.N., Ethiopia's Foreign Minister, Aklilu Habtewold, promised:

If, therefore, this formula is adopted in its present wording, Ethiopia will scrupulously respect it and will make every effort to see that it is put into effect.¹⁶

Ethiopia's Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Zewde Gebrehiwet, too, invited the leaders of the Independence Bloc to a meeting in Asmara and assured them that Ethiopia was going to implement the federation "according to its letters and spirit."¹⁷

However, no sooner was Eritrea officially linked with Ethiopia in 1952 than the promises proved to be empty. Absolutism, as in 19th century Europe, does not tolerate diversity.¹⁸ In fact, the whole concept of nation-building appears to presuppose cultural uniformity and the homogenizing behavior of the centralized state.¹⁹ Accordingly, the absolutist state in Shoa could not tolerate the distinct status of Eritrea. As such, the Amhara and Eritrean elites stood poles apart. While for the Amhara federation was merely a stepping stone to annexation, for Eritrean elites, such as Wolde-ab, it could have been

a model for the future political development of the Ethiopian Empire, as the beginning of a trend which would

counteract the unfortunate tendency by the Amhara to centralize the imperial power at Addis Ababa, especially since the time of Menelik II.²⁰

Contrary to Wolde-ab's hopes, Ethiopia could not wait to dismantle the federation through its representative, Andargachew Messai, the Emperor's son-in-law. Resolution 390 A (V) was under siege. Only days after the enactment of the Federation, for instance, Andargachew told the American Consul, Edward Mulcahy, that the Eritrean flag-raising ceremony was "illegal." "Legally," he continued, "no Eritrean flag exists."²¹

Holding the federal authority, Ethiopia now had a free hand in Eritrea. Its intervention in Eritrea's affairs became much more blatant, with no outside power monitoring its behavior. An Amhara army was stationed in Aqordat, the western lowlands—a behavior that instantly generated resentment on the part of the Eritreans. According to one of the five Eritrean members of the Imperial Federal Council, *Blatta Gebreigziabher Gebremichael*:

We did not want them to bring in their army to Aqordat. We told them we were going to ask for the army if we needed it, say if we were attacked by foreign forces. We even requested the Emperor's representative and son-in-law to leave Eritrea. We did not need him.²²

Wolde-ab: A Force to be Reckoned With. After the enactment of the federation, despite Eritrean resistance against Ethiopia's uninhibited interference, terror continued even more crudely. As a major force to be dealt with, Wolde-ab became an obvious target. He was

clearly one of the most able and best educated of the Tigrinya Christians of Eritrea. In many ways he may be considered almost the proto-nationalist of modern Eritrea, the inheritor of a ... tradition of anti-Shoanism among the people of the Tigray ... and a force with which the Amhara will have to reckon.²³

After his election as the president of the Labor Union, Wolde-ab barely survived the seventh attempt on his life on January 13 1953 in the main street of Asmara.²⁴ Although he was seriously wounded and hospitalized for several months,²⁵ he remained firm in his stand against what he called the "ruthless authority and autocratic rule of the Amhara." "In spite of his adversities," the American Consul Edward Clark informed the State Department, "he spoke rationally and intelligently and I was frankly impressed by the sincerity and conviction with which he discussed the problems confronting Eritrea ... I should state in all fairness to him that his remarks were not impassioned or demagogic, but rather level and thoughtful at all times." He grieved at what was happening to Eritrea and as a result, he turned down the Emperor's invitation to go to Addis because that would have meant submission to the "authority of the Amhara."²⁶

Realizing that democracy in Eritrea was "set back a hundred years,"²⁷ he decided to emigrate and applied for a visa to establish residency in Khartoum. In the application, he sternly warned Andargachew: "If you deny me permit and I get killed, you would be responsible for it."²⁸ According to the American Consul, Edward Clark, since the Amhara were aware of the potential danger of allowing him to leave the country, they kept him under careful surveillance.²⁹ They did not want him to be out of their sight and offered him safety in Addis Ababa which he turned down instantly. Yet, he made it difficult on them to deny him an exit visa by giving copies of his request to the U.N. representative, the Sudan Mission, the U.S., French, British and Italian Consulates. And they reluctantly gave him visa, ordering him to return to his country after six months to request a pardon from "your *Negus*," the Emperor.³⁰ Leaving his wife and four children behind, he fled to the Sudan. Lamenting Wolde-ab's departure, the American Consul informed the State Department:

It is indeed regrettable that Eritrea should lose one of its few educated and intelligent sons, just when it is so vitally in need of all of them, but his elimination from the local scene by one means or another, given his abil-

ity and popularity with the people, was virtually a foregone conclusion.³¹

Attrition of the Federation and Popular Disenchantment: The domestic Eritrean political landscape may have lost "one political personality of Woldeab's apparent ability."³² Yet, his departure pioneered the flight of many nationalist leaders to regroup abroad and carry on an armed struggle against the Amhara state.³³ Within Eritrea, the struggle to retain the autonomous regime of the region continued. As the regime was heading towards killing the federation by a combination of terror and bribery, Eritrean parliamentarians passed a motion against the violation of the very basic tenets of the federation. This motion was passed with 41 in favor, 9 against and 1 abstention.³⁴

The resolution condemned the banning of Eritreans from participating in the structures of the Federal Government-- judicial, defence, foreign affairs, finance, foreign communications and foreign trade. Eritreans were entitled to those rights to the Constitution the U.N. gave to them.³⁵ The resolution also denounced the levying of taxes by the Federal Government on salt products which should have been levied by the local Government as stated in Article 6 of the Constitution.³⁶

The resolution, in essence, decried the gradual, but certain, violation of the key article in the Constitution, Article 3, which stated that "Eritrea shall constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown." The assault on Article 3 directed from different corners was in the final analysis targeting the concept and practice of federation itself. Two representatives, Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Mohammed Adem, in particular, explicitly aired their desire that Andargachew Messai, the Emperor's representative and son-in-law, keep his hands off the internal affairs of Eritrea.³⁷

To the appeal that Ethiopia had to stop meddling in the domestic affairs of Eritrea, Andargachew Messai responded with absolute candor. He went to the Parliament and replied in Amarinya - a language that was alien to the Eritreans- that the appeal for his office to keep its hands off the internal affairs

of Eritrea was senseless. He rhetorically asked, "Whose hands should come and get involved in Eritrea, then?" For him the external as well as the internal affairs of Eritrea concerned Ethiopia:

To the Office of the Representative of the Emperor, there is no distinction between internal and external affairs; and there has never been one. The Eritrean affairs are fully the affairs of Ethiopia and the Emperor.³⁸

As stated earlier, the end of colonial rule had been warmly welcomed in Eritrea and many had "preferred the devil to the Italians." This aversion to the Italians was fertile ground for Ethiopia, giving it a golden opportunity to recruit freely Unionists whose slogan became "Ethiopia or death." Yet, both Unionists and anti-Unionists were alienated by the arrogant behavior of the Amhara soon after the enactment of the federation. In 1953, an active Unionist best summarized the prevalent sense of betrayal, disenchantment and regret among the Unionists themselves by lamenting: "Was it 'Ethiopia or death' or 'Ethiopia and death' that we said?"³⁹ Far from being sheer rhetoric, the remarks were prophetic. As the subsequent decades showed, Eritreans did not have an "either-or" choice. They got both Ethiopia and death.

Similarly, in 1994, after liberation the Eritrean Vice-Minister of Information and Culture remembered the disheartenment of his Unionist father:

My father, who used to live in the port of Massawa had such bitter experience with the Italians and the British that he became a staunch anti-European. As a result, he supported the Ethiopian cause and became a Unionist. In 1964, I asked him why he made such a gross mistake and his response was: "The fault is not mine. It is that of the Ethiopians. They do not know justice."⁴⁰

Whatever faith Eritreans may have had in Ethiopia disintegrated as top Unionists such as Tedla Bairu, who had been instrumental in handing over Eritrea to the Ethiopians, were re-

moved from power. Clearly Tedla Bairu, even as the Chief Executive of Eritrea, was subordinate to Andargachew Messai, who had real power. Tedla Bairu resented Andargachew's interference in the internal affairs of Eritrea.⁴¹ He ultimately resigned as Chief Executive "for health reasons."⁴² In direct violation of the Eritrean Constitution, he was replaced by an even more subservient Asfaha Woldemichael.⁴³ Instead of being elected by the Parliament, Asfaha was appointed by the Emperor. Belatedly, even Tedla Bairu understood the real motives of the regime when he confided to the American Consul that "The Shoans ... could not care less what happened to Eritrea, provided it was fully integrated into the Empire."⁴⁴ As his utility waned, Tedla was dumped in Sweden as Ethiopia's ambassador, an "obscure exile" reminiscent of Lorenzo Taezaz's and Ephrem Tewoldemedhin's fate.

In addition, vital terminological changes that symbolized the fast-changing status of Eritrea, foreshadowing the death of federation, were made. "Eritrean Government" was changed to "Eritrean Administration" and "Chief Executive" became "Administrator."⁴⁵

While the Amhara continued to strangle the autonomous status of Eritrea using bribery and terror, the struggle to maintain the federation continued in parliament. Outside of the parliament, workers and students were constantly on strike and staging demonstrations against the Ethiopian intervention.

The Unfading Wolde-ab and Early Mobilization: The single most potent and symbolic resistance came from the radio broadcast of the exiled leader, Wolde-ab Woldemariam. He had managed to leave the country in 1953 for the Sudan and ultimately to Egypt, where he established his residency — after turning down asylum offers from the U.S., France, Britain and Italy. Egypt had been sympathetic to the struggle for Eritrean independence. It had also harbored some unarticulated self-interests in the region:

Eritrea must be independent. That's what its people want.
If it has to be divided, then Egypt has rights over Eritrea
- based on history, ethnicity, religion and geography.⁴⁶

For this reason, in 1955, Nasser's Egypt gave Wolde-ab a radio program to be broadcast from Radio Cairo in Tigrinya. He used this program to air his protest against the Amhara regime that was killing Eritrea's distinct status. As a result, Wolde-ab's popularity continued to soar in self-exile, too. Courageous, articulate, consistent and a person of immense integrity, Wolde-ab "had seen death seven times," to use his own words. Every attempt on his life augmented his legendary image. With this elevated stature, his radio program became the single most effective anti-Amhara mobilizing tool at a point in time when every democratic right that Eritreans had was eroding.

His mastery of the Tigrinya language and literature⁴⁷ made his political messages even stronger and more intelligible, not only among Eritreans, but also among Tigrayans south of the Mereb. His metaphorical description of Eritrea as corn, for instance, is fondly remembered by Tigrayans in Axum who used to rush to listen to his late afternoon broadcast:

Efine'seya kam sabe'ayen yechehem, kam qole'an yehezel. ⁴⁸

Corn, grows beard [silk] like an adult and, like a child, it is carried away on [people's] back.

Referring to Eritrea's regression, the message he was conveying was that "advanced" Eritrea had fallen under the rule of "backward" Ethiopia. Although the radio program lasted for only eight months, its effect was extensive. Even today, people in the trans-Mereb fondly remember the program and Wolde-ab's messages.

By surviving seven attempts on his life, Wolde-ab personified the long and arduous struggle to exhume the distinct Eritrean status. His stormy life-history and nationalism contributed to the forging of the political identity of almost all the Eritrean revolutionary elites:

We grew up hearing about all the attempts on Wolde-ab's life. We used to adore him. In 1956, he was making radio broadcast from Cairo. We used to listen to his messages every single day. As children, we were rehears-

ing what we were going to do when Wolde-ab returned. My older brother, an ardent young nationalist, used to tell us how we were going to form a secret service to protect Wolde-ab and to kill his opponents. Wolde-ab used to be a household name.⁴⁹

Wolde-ab's political messages were in marked contrast with the limited flow of information the Amhara censorship allowed. The first casualty during the federation was freedom of the press. In 1954, for instance, the most widely read independent newspaper, *Haddas Ertra*, a continuation of *Hanti Ertra*, was banned when it published an article that exposed the Ethiopian seizure of customs revenue that should have belonged to the Eritrean government. Its Tigrinya and Arabic editors were sentenced to five and three year prison terms respectively.⁵⁰ The type and extent of press freedom that British Eritrea experienced was, therefore, completely wiped out.

Further, all political parties were banned and the parliamentary elections of 1956 had to be conducted on a non-partisan basis. In 1958, perhaps the last-ditch peaceful effort to salvage Eritrean status from complete death was expressed by popular demonstrations and a major labor strike mostly in Asmara and Massawa. The strike was brutally suppressed by the Ethiopian army, killing an estimated 500 people.⁵¹

Federation Dies: By 1958, federation was at its twilight and the Amhara were ready to deliver its *coup de grace*. On December 26, 1958, in violation of Article 21 of the Constitution, the Eritrean flag was replaced by the Ethiopian flag. Annexation became imminent and opposition was intensified. But, the state's reaction was to use force extensively. In fact, Emperor Haile Selassie gathered Eritreans in the Asmara Palace and spoke his mind in plain and simple words: "Eritrea: we need its land, not its people."⁵² These infamous words have since been perceived by Eritreans as the components of the catchphrase of the Amhara policy towards Eritrea.

The federal marriage between Eritrea, which beginning to see the lights of modernity, albeit dimly, and feudal Ethiopia was anachronistic. The Emperor could ill-afford democracy in

Eritrea while the rest of his empire was still feudal, monarchical and autocratic. Democracy in Eritrea would have caused political awakening in the rest of the Empire, undermining his power.

Finally, on November 14, 1962, Asfaha Woldemichael, the Chief Executive, went to the parliament and got them to pass a "motion" for the dissolution of the federation. He argued that the name and concept of federation were alien to the Eritreans. It was designed by foreigners to undermine the unity of the Ethiopian people. This "motion" was destined to reduce the Eritrean status to that of a mere province of Ethiopia on a par with the 13 others.⁵³

Parliamentarians were forced to sign the "motion." The police chief, Tedla Oqbit, told them they had to support the "motion" and sign for the termination of the federation. One of them, Tesfai Zemichael, a former friend of Tedla Oqbit, was summoned to the office of the Chief of Police and strongly "advised" by Tedla Oqbit himself to support the "motion." When the parliamentarian ignored the advice and declined to convene, he was shot to death on his way to Shire in Tigray.⁵⁴

While the representatives were being forced to sign the death warrant of the federation, not only was the Parliament surrounded and filled with the police and army, but the entire Eritrean population literally lived in terror. One of the commanders of the Ethiopian army candidly reports:

I co-commanded one of the companies that ringed Asmara during that time. It was clear from our orders that we were there in case of trouble from the Assembly or the people. In addition to our battalion, the entire police force, the air force and a detachment of infantry from part of Ethiopia were all on hand, making their presence felt by marching through the streets and generally being as visible as possible.⁵⁵

Immense terror caused the "motion" to be passed. Parliamentarians had no choice but to sign it. Not surprisingly, the speech the Emperor made the very next day "accepting the resolution"

was almost identical with the one Asfaha had made in the Eritrean Parliament a day earlier.⁵⁶

The terror left a lasting scar on the people. The scar remained with the young as they grew up, ultimately forcing them to take up arms against the regime. The current head of the National Union of Eritrean Women tells a memory of her childhood:

I was in the primary school when the federation was abolished. Then we used to see the soldiers in big trucks shouting their slogan of "*Embi yale sew tiyit agurusew*" ("Make he who says 'no' swallow a bullet"). They and their trucks used to scare us a lot; and we associated Ethiopia with them.⁵⁷

The annexation pained Eritrean elites, Unionists and anti-Unionists alike. Nor did it please the Tigrayan feudal elites south of the Mereb. They were saddened by the dismantling of the federation and the suffocation of the distinct Eritrean status.

It had long been the policy of the Amhara ruling classes to integrate the Tigrayan ruling classes within their political and cultural orbit. They were enticing the Tigrayan elites by political rewards and marriage diplomacy and transforming the Tigrayan palace in Mekelle into an island of Amhara culture. Thus, the governor of Tigray in the 1960s, Mengesha Seyoum, great-grandson of Yohannes IV, was married to the Emperor's grand daughter on January 30, 1949. In view of the positive attitudes the *Kebessa* had towards the descendants of Emperor Yohannes, the political marriage was a symbolic step towards neutralizing centrifugal tendencies in both Tigray and Eritrea.⁵⁸

Yet Mengesha did not completely succumb to the Amhara political machinations of marriage diplomacy. When the Eritrean Chief Administrator, Asfaha Woldemichael, called Mengesha in 1962 to "congratulate" him on the termination of the federation, Mengesha politely passed the telephone to his wife, the Emperor's granddaughter. *Blatta* Gebreigziabher Gebremichael, the former Eritrean member of the Imperial Fed-

eral Council who was visiting Mengesha in the Mekelle palace, as Asfaha's call came, recites his reaction:

I went to Mekelle to visit Mengesha Seyoum. Asfaha Woldemichael called to congratulate him on the dissolution of the federation and complete merger of Eritrea with Ethiopia. Mengesha was saddened. He was angry so much so that he could not eat any food. "*Blatta*", he called me, "you had this leverage and you blew it." He continued, "We had something to look up to you and you guys blew it." He was restless and angry. We drove to Illala; then we went to Shikiet. The next day we went to the Diesa forestry. He did not eat anything, nor did he drink a cup of tea the whole day and night.⁵⁹

Mengesha never accepted the congratulations from the Eritrean leader. He understood the dangers that had befallen the Eritreans. Far from being assimilated into the Amhara political orbit, Mengesha appears to have entertained a strong trans-Mereb identity.

Besieged Identity

From the time of federation, Eritreans, including the Unionists, had not wanted to see their flag completely replaced by the Ethiopian flag; nor did they want to lose Tigrinya as their official language. For instance, Wolde-ab who had initially favored unity with Ethiopia on the basis of *wu'el* (agreement, conditions, contract) unequivocally argued for the retention of Tigrinya as the official language of Eritrea as well as Tigray. That was why he lambasted the memorandum the Ethiopian government submitted to the U.N., which claimed that since Tigrinya is a dialect of Amarinya, it would have to be replaced by the latter as the official language of Eritrea when and if unity was going to come:

Only few people understand Amarinya ... Who is going to enforce administrative and security jobs ... Or as what

happens in Tigray today, are we going to be led by *mischievous interpreters!*⁶⁰

However, as soon as federation was implemented in 1952, Amarinya began to elbow Tigrinya out. When the Emperor visited Eritrea in 1954, he emphasized the need to study Amarinya, which he called an "international language."⁶¹ As early as 1955, Andargachew Messai began to address the Eritrean Parliament in Amarinya. His speech and the Emperor's messages began to appear on the government-owned Tigrinya paper, *Zemen*, in Amarinya.⁶² Clearly, it was not meant for people to read since only few people could understand the language. But, it foreshadowed what kind of status Amarinya was going to have over Tigrinya.

Ultimately, in violation of Article 38 of the *Constitution of Eritrea*, which stated that "Tigrigna and Arabic shall be the official languages of Eritrea," Amarinya deposed both Tigrinya and Arabic and became the official language.

Most Eritreans, who in 1952 had not objected to joining with Ethiopia, did not have a clear idea of what they were getting into. Apparently, the wide gap between what they expected and what the reality was in Ethiopia created in them what Fred Halliday and Maxime Molyneux call "a factor of repulsion."⁶³ As stated earlier, even Wolde-ab, one of the most enlightened Eritreans, thought the regime in Addis was Tigrayan. They may have expected that the Tigrayan regime they left in 1889 (when their territory was amputated from trans-Mereb Tigray) to be still in power in Ethiopia. This, they found after 1952, was far from being the case.

Within less than a decade, in any case, feudal Ethiopia tightened its grip over more "modernized" Eritrea. The assault on the Eritrean identity generated unfathomable grievances:

My generation experienced all the oppressive measures taken by the Ethiopians. We grew up speaking and writing in Tigrinya. And they forced us to study in their language, Amarinya. We watched the Eritrean flag being lowered and the Ethiopian flag being raised in its stead. We watched them assaulting our culture. We ob-

served a backward army enforcing their oppressive rules on us.⁶⁴

The Perception of Plundering Eritrea

Eritreans started to develop the feeling of being robbed of their distinct status when their parliament was dissolved and the federation was abolished, their flag was lowered, their political parties and labor unions were banned, their independent newspapers were shut down and they were made to accept Amarinya as their official language. Such profound grievances were reinforced by the notion that the Amhara were plundering the wealth of Eritrea. Papers such as *Dehay Eritrea* used to say "The property of Eritrea is being plundered and carried to Addis Ababa while Eritreans are suffering from hunger and deprivation."⁶⁵ And resistance continued:

My father used to work for the railway which was among the first properties the Ethiopians obtained from the British. He opposed the transfer, arguing that the authority over the railway should have gone to the Eritrean government and he was exiled for that to Aqordat. He lived unemployed.⁶⁶

How much Eritrea was plundered is difficult to fathom. Yet, there were enough indications about the rapacity of the Amhara rulers that reinforced the perception. For instance, as stated earlier, contrary to what was stated in the *Constitution of Eritrea*, customs revenues were being appropriated by the federal government and this generated a lot of resentment. One of the five Eritrean members of the Imperial Federal Council remembers: "We even went as far as suggesting that the ports could be 'Free Ports' - no taxes on imported and exported goods."⁶⁷

Eritreans believed all their revenues from sources such as the Municipality of Asmara, were being appropriated by the Amhara. Such rumors received credence when the Amhara began to make some strange moves such as taking away the iron telephone poles in Eritrea and replacing them with wooden poles:

When I was growing up in Mendefera, I remember the Amhara were taking the iron telephone poles to Addis Ababa. The students of St. George High School in Mendefera interrupted the whole process by throwing stones. Ultimately, though, they managed to take them away, leaving us with wooden telephone poles.⁶⁸

The perception of Eritrea's plunder is often symbolized by the demolition of the freight-carrying ropeway that stretched from Massawa to Asmara and the sale of its parts to foreign companies and governments.⁶⁹ This is the first example given by almost every Eritrean, revolutionary elite or civilian, who claims that the Amhara plundered Eritrea.

The ropeway had been built between September 1936 and April 1937. As the Eritrean war economy flourished and the Italians invaded Ethiopia, they found it economically viable to build a ropeway from the port of Massawa to Asmara. It was intended to relieve the traffic on the road and railway. Rising from sea level to an altitude of 24,000 meters and stretching for 74.7 kilometers, "It is the longest and highest freight carrying ropeway in the world."⁷⁰

After 1941, when the war economy collapsed, the utility of the ropeway declined and it was wearing out, requiring repair. For instance, the average monthly tonnage conveyed declined from 2,684 in December 1942 to 972 tons in April 1943.⁷¹ And the British believed that it was unlikely to be used again.⁷²

Maintaining the ropeway, which was used less and less, became too costly and the British wanted to sell it. Italy, Trans-Jordan and other governments and companies showed interest in it. Yet, international law became an issue. Whereas some of the British authorities wanted to regard it as war booty that belonged to Britain, others argued a caretaker administration could only have a usufructuary power over all fixtures. The arguments for and against the demolition of the ropeway continued until 1948, although it had been decided in 1945 that demolishing it was against the law:

I am advised that under International Law, the British Military Administration in Eritrea has no title to dis-

pose of fixed assets such as the Ropeway which are the property of the Italian Government, since the Occupying Power has no more than usufructuary rights over fixed installations of this kind.⁷³

Once federation was enacted, the Amhara did not feel they had any accountability to international law and Andargachew Messai demolished and sold the ropeway's parts to foreign companies. As the most visible property which Eritrea lost, the disappearance of the ropeway symbolized the Amhara plunder of Eritrea.

Feudalism Besieges "Modernity"

The Shoans are not familiar with money economy, agriculture and administration; and they will not be familiar with those areas of development in the near future. Thus, since the Shoan regime is a house built on bad foundations, it cannot rule its own people properly let alone govern the Eritrean people who are more civilized than the Amhara. Take, for instance, the roads the Italians built for them. They are going bad and the Amhara do not know how to maintain them.⁷⁴

This sense of being more "modernized" than the Amhara was one of the main reasons why many Eritreans did not want to join Ethiopia. The Amhara were considered unfit to administer Eritrea:

The living standards of the Ethiopians are well known to foreigners, let alone to us. And to call Ethiopia a backward and an undeveloped country is not meant to insult her; it is stating a matter of fact.⁷⁵

While the anti-Unionists took this line, many Unionists did not seem to have had a correct picture of Ethiopia. They had an extremely inflated and false impression of the country which they struggled to join. Haile Selassie's personality cult played an important role in giving Eritreans a wrong image of Ethio-

pia. The Emperor was viewed as a victor against their enemy, Italy. As the head of the absolutist state in Shoa, his persona began to acquire a divine stature. Like Louis XIV, he could say "*L'etat, c'est moi.*" The monarch who personified not only the Amhara nation, but the Ethiopian empire-state was nicknamed *Tsehayu Negus* (*Le roi soleil*/the Sun-King). Such personality cult of the monarch of "Christian" Ethiopia percolated the *Kebessa*, and to a certain extent, made merger with Ethiopia more appealing.

Once the merger took place, though, Eritrean Unionists were unpleasantly surprised, regretting their actions very much. "Let me tell you what an Eritrean captain who had been a Unionist told me," the Eritrean Land Commissioner recalls:

When the Emperor came to Eritrea in 1952, he [the captain] was one of those who received him at the Mereb. As he was saluting the Emperor he watched the Ethiopian soldiers wearing sandals. Right there he was frozen with regret and he forgot to bring down his saluting hand. He could not believe the backwardness of the people who were going to be our next rulers.⁷⁶

Being well familiar with the standard of living of their former two rulers, the Italians and the British, Eritreans expected of the Amhara a more sophisticated and superior standard of living to that of their own. The first contact with their "next rulers" generated dismay among Eritreans, adults and children alike. Schoolchildren could hardly conceal the loathing created by the marked contrast between their outgoing and incoming rulers:

In primary school, we were taught by the British who used to come to class well-dressed and wearing neckties. When they left, the Amhara came from pedagogical institutions such as the Debre Berhan Teachers' Institute. Some of them used to come to class in bare feet. For us, the primary school children, the contrast was so obvious, and it was but hard to imagine what our next rulers looked like.⁷⁷

The so-called "modernization" of Eritrea, however, needs to be qualified. The colonial economy did not significantly disrupt the Eritrean peasant economy. The kind of monoculture economy observed in Indonesia (40% of the world's rubber), Ghana (33% of the world's chocolate) and Brazil (45% of the world's coffee)⁷⁸ did not exist in Italian Eritrea. And no profound economic transformation had affected the peasant masses.

Whatever industrial infrastructure existed in Eritrea belonged to the Italians and there was neither a nascent indigenous capitalism nor a strong native middle class. Whereas it was the Italians who were the industrial capitalists, it was mostly the Arabs, particularly the Lebanese and Yemenis, Indians and Pakistanis who were in control of the commercial economy. Native Eritreans, on the other hand, were excluded from the main economy and they were only allowed limited social interaction with their colonial masters. Yet, receiving changes in values, attitudes and expectations by mere association with the Italians gave Eritreans the sense of being modernized.⁷⁹

The end of the Italian rule, however, gave Eritreans the chance to claim the beautiful European city of Asmara. With colonialism gone, they could now frequent the cafes in Asmara where, in the past, they had not been allowed to sit and sip a cup of coffee, the main streets of the city whose side-walks they had not been allowed to promenade and the Italian residential quarters which they had been forbidden to see. It was what the Italians left that made them feel they were more "modernized" than their incoming rulers, the Amhara.

Notwithstanding the mutually exclusive lives of Eritreans and Italians, the little Western culture that percolated the native quarters was good enough to give Eritreans, even the illiterate, a sense of superiority over the traditionally-minded and feudal Amhara ruling classes. The "us and them" dichotomy was instantly created as the Amhara set foot in Eritrea:

By virtue of being members of the ruling class, the Amhara came to Asmara and began promenading the sidewalks of streets, the likes of which they had never

been to. They were residing in villas and apartments they had never seen before - villas and apartments in the main streets of Asmara which had belonged to the Italians and which Eritreans could not even enter. They found themselves way above us by virtue of being our masters ... Housemaids like my mother who used to work for the Italians were now working for the Amhara. The Europeans, due to their technology, were superior to their maids; but not the Amhara. In fact, the Amhara were inferior to their maids. It was their servants who used to teach them a lot of things including how to handle their own homes. They did not know even how to iron clothes. At least, the Europeans knew how to iron clothes!⁸⁰

The Amhara imperial annexation of the huge landmass of Oromia, the southern part of Ethiopia that is inhabited mainly by the Oromiffa-speakers, at the end of the 19th century gave them the opportunity to extend the sphere of their cultural, economic and political hegemony in the southern, eastern and south-western regions of today's Ethiopia. Since power and prejudice reinforce one another, the Amhara settler aristocracy in Oromia as well as the absentee landlords living in Addis Ababa and the rest of the Amhara regions, started to see themselves as an imperial people, superior to the Oromo and other vanquished peoples of the south. The mentality of the Amhara ruling classes and the collective consciousness of their people was forged by this proven capacity to conquer and rule. It was, nonetheless, a serious misstep when they approached the Eritreans, who were not living in the "pre-modern" era, with the same mentality.

They entered Eritrea behaving as rulers and masters replacing the Italians and they expected to be treated like that. Establishing cultural hegemony was expected to be the best policy of firmly integrating Eritrea within the Ethiopian Empire. Thus, Amarinya became the academic and administrative language of Eritrea. The main street in Asmara was Christened "Haile Selassie I Street" and other streets were given with alien Amhara names such as Tegulet, a remote town in Shoa.

Some Amhara feudal lords, such as *Ras Wollie Butul*, about whom Eritreans knew absolutely nothing, were now having streets named after them. Cinemas and theaters were given new names. *Cinema Odeon* was renamed *Cinema Tana*, *Cinema Impero* became *Cinema Ethiopia*, *Cinema Roma* was christened *Cinema Addis Ababa*. The renaming of streets, squares and cinemas after Italian colonialism may be legitimate. However, replacing those names with Amhara names, in the hope that this would accelerate the death of the distinct Eritrean status, reminded Eritreans they were still under an alien rule - one that replaced the Italian.

Yet, despite all these efforts, the Amhara failed to implant a sense of inferiority upon the Eritreans. Regardless of their class, religious, ethnic and educational background, Eritreans did not accept the Amhara as their superiors. This could, perhaps, be best illustrated by the way an illiterate Eritrean maid raised her child in the family of members of the Amhara ruling classes. She inculcated in her child a sense of distinct identity, implanting in him the necessary self-confidence. The then child, now a political leader, narrates at length the politicization of his identity:

Personally, I grew up feeling Eritrean - from my very childhood, without being told by anyone. My father died when I was a child. Without any verbal communication, my mother inculcated in my mind that we were all by ourselves and that we were different. I had this feeling when I was 8 or 9 years old. I was only 7 years old when my father, a farmer, died in Senafe and we had to come to Asmara so that my mother could work. The first job she found was in an Amhara family as a cook. This was the family of "C.D." who was one of the "Liaison Officers" Ethiopia used to send to Eritrea in the 1940s. The family also brought Amhara maids with them. At the time, I used to observe my mother's behavior was different from that of the Amhara maids. Whereas the Amhara maids humbly took the sometimes abusive behavior of the bosses, my mother never wanted to put up with any humiliating relationship. I carefully

observed when she stood up for herself, courageously responding to the Amhara bosses. The wife of "C.D." used to freely hit the Amhara maids; but she had no such freedom with my mother who used to tell her: "Listen woman! You are a woman and I am a woman. You hit me, I will hit you back." I watched all these things attentively because I was living with them. However, every year my mother used to take me to my home region of Senafe, Akele Guzai, introducing me to all my relatives.

My mother was illiterate and she never made any effort to study the language of her bosses, Amarinya. One would expect her, at least, to try to speak the language just to please them. This, she never did. Her assertive personality did not only keep her aloof from the Amhara culture, it also kept me away from assimilating. She never tutored me. However indirectly, though, her pride influenced me. It was her personality that gave me the foundation of my identity.

In 1952, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. "C.D." left and the Emperor's son-in-law, Andargachew Messai, came as the "Crown's Representative" in Eritrea. His special secretary, "E.F.", hired my mother ...

I liked their residence. Their children liked me, mainly because I played soccer, which they did not. But, whenever I had some friction with them, I used to call them "Amhara." I do not know where I got this insult. When they tried to look down upon me, I derided them even more. As an Eritrean, and particularly as an Asmara boy, I devalued them notwithstanding their membership in the ruling class. Frankly, I despised them. But I could not leave the house because I liked it. It was quite comfortable.

I was in the third grade when I joined the "E.F." family. As the child of their maid, I was a non-entity. I remember the man did not like my behavior because I was not familiar with the Amhara feudal social values. I would enter the house dribbling my ball or expressing my feelings freely, not to mention that I was not

bowing to them, something that was alien to me. He saw me as a delinquent child who lacked basic manners, a child not to be taken seriously. Actually, he had an entirely wrong impression. I was a good student and a well-behaved child. Until I was in the 5th grade, the man did not know me, he did not care to. It could never dawn on them that their maid could raise her child properly. Naturally, they ignored me, but honestly, I did not care. All that I needed was the shelter and the food.

I came first in the 5th grade. For the first time then the Ethiopians began to give prizes not only to those who came first in all subjects but to those who got the highest marks in Amarinya as well. Naturally, I got the highest marks in Amarinya, too, because I was living with an Amhara family. The prizes were delivered by Andargachew but "E.F.", as his special secretary, was also there. I took both prizes. Surprisingly, he did not recognize me although I was wearing the usual clothes. Pictures were taken of all of us during the ceremony and "E.F." went to Photo Eritrea to collect his pictures. There he saw mine and bought some.

Taken by total surprise, he showed me my pictures later in the evening. He asked me to show him my exercise books all of which were in English. Although he spoke English, French and Italian, he could hardly read or understand my exercise books. Thereafter, I was treated nicely, just like one of their children. But even then, I always spoke with my mother in Tigrinya in their own house. She always spoke to her bosses in Tigrinya and they always responded in Amarinya and somehow they communicated.

One day when I was in the 8th grade, "E.F." promised to send me abroad for schooling. I happily said "okay". But his friend was amazed that I did not bow in gratitude ... It was beyond their comprehension that such Amhara feudal manners were alien to Eritreans.⁸¹ I never tried to learn them ... And the promise never materialized. Perhaps, there was another reason why it did not materialize ... I kept on swearing by my father "B" and

his wife asked me, with a note of protest, why I was not swearing by "E.F.", her husband and my guardian. I responded he still was not my father. "B" was my father. Thereafter, they were cold and the relationship was defined. It should be noted here that customarily people adopt the names of their guardians. I resented it and my mother would never have allowed it, either, because she did not want me to go out of my way to please them. That was my mother! At the same time, she used to yell at me if I misbehaved saying "Either do what they want you to do, or leave their home."

When I joined the University in Addis Ababa, the "E.F." family was transferred to Addis. I used to visit them. But I never took Amhara friends with me to their home and they used to complain why I was not dating an Amhara girl. At any rate, they perfectly understood my political inclinations and they used to tell me I was a "secessionist" like those in the Eritrean jungle.

When I returned to Addis Ababa from my post-graduate studies in 1971, I became a full member of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. In 1975, I decided to go to the field telling my mother, who had been living with me, that she had to go to Eritrea. I told her I was transferred to Tigray and once I got settled there, I was going to continue helping her. My mother believed me but the wife of "E.F." did not and she told my crying mother: "Do not believe this mischievous person. He is going to the jungle to join his brothers. I know him very well." After victory in 1991, that is seventeen years later, I went to Addis and visited the wife of "E.F.". She tearfully hugged me and kissed me. Then she added: "And now you are happy! You dismembered it [Eritrea from Ethiopia]!"

They were really a liberal and nice family. Yet, I did not want to be like them. I wanted to maintain my identity and my mother played an important role in this. Here, of course, I have not added the political consciousness I developed outside of the home - in school and

with friends. However, all this was a supplement to whatever my mother had instilled in me.⁸²

The abridged life history of a political leader across a time span of four decades, shows how much Eritreans and the Amhara lived in mutual avoidance. Like water and oil in a glass, they were separated, living in mutual exclusivity even when they happened to cohabit the same house, living under the same roof as in the case of the "E.F" household, described above.

Despite the economic dependence upon the family of members of the Amhara ruling classes, the illiterate maid and her young child defined themselves as different from, not inferior to, their bosses. The determination to retain their own language, Tigrinya, and to use it in the house of their bosses with one another or with their bosses, the absence of any effort by the maid to learn Amarinya, the language of the bosses, as well as the rejection of Amhara feudal social values such as bowing are all "symbolic border guards" in the Barthian sense.⁸³

Another vital "border guard" that marked the Eritrean self-perceived boundary from that of the Amhara, was an exaggerated view of the Italian heritage of Eritrea. It has been with great pride that Eritreans utilize Italian vocabulary in their Tigrinya. Whereas nationalist activists have always made efforts to purge Amarinya words and phrases from Tigrinya, no similar attempts have been made to purge the Italian influence on the language. Almost every Eritrean uses Italian words proudly, not infrequently improperly and out of context. Simultaneously, the hatred against the Italians subsided while hostility against the Amhara was pronounced. Paradoxically, far from "preferring the devil to the Italians," Eritreans began to speak about their Italian heritage with pride. Based on the symbols of colonial heritage, they began to develop a mythical perception of a superior way of life during the Italian occupation.

Eritreans in the "Amharaland"

Eritrean identity consciousness was further augmented in the process of interaction with the Amhara outside of Eritrea. De-

rogatory statements about their people and homeland gave them a sense of being different. Even those who left Eritrea with no sense of collective consciousness, were made to develop an Eritrean political identity in the "Amharaland":

My Eritrean sense of identity developed in Ethiopia. Insults and epithets such as "lousy Tigrayan," "your homeland is poor and rocky" and "you were carried into the Amharaland on the back of a lorry" ... made me feel I was different.⁸⁴

Exposure to Ethiopia had an adverse effect on the image Eritreans had of Ethiopia. They were not impressed with Ethiopia, when they saw it after federation. Even the capital, Addis Ababa, looked a huge village when they compared it with Asmara. Repentance about the merger with Ethiopia was, therefore, increasingly developing in the minds of many Eritreans:

I went to high school in Addis Ababa. There was nothing I liked about Ethiopia. Certainly, the technological development of the country was not attractive. I did not find Ethiopia to be the big, beautiful and bountiful country the Amhara boast about.⁸⁵

Worse still, the Amhara elites such as the university students who claimed to be radical and Marxist revolutionaries continued to manifest ethnic chauvinism against the Eritreans. Such attitudes from the cream of the Amhara, whom one would expect to be liberated from ethnic chauvinistic hang-ups, only aggravated the anti-Amhara feelings of Eritreans:

When I went to Addis Ababa University, there was one particular incident, among others, that hit me badly. In the late 1960s, Mekonnen Bishaw [an Amhara] and Tilahun Gizaw [from Addis, but of Tigrayan extraction] were running for the presidency of USUAA (University Students Union of Addis Ababa). The Mekonnen Bishaw camp disseminated a false rumor that Tilahun Gizaw had links with the Eritrean Liberation Front. It

worked and he lost his presidential bid. That gave Tilahun a boost to his Tigrayan identity consciousness, confiding in me how much he regretted not knowing Tigrinya. As an Eritrean, it also hit me hard.⁸⁶

Furthermore, Eritreans were facing job discrimination in the "Amharaland" which contributed to the shaping of their political identity. Discrimination and abusive behavior were rampant and blatant in some institutions such as Ethiopian Air Lines. For instance, if Eritrean trainees happened to be late during flight training, the Amhara used to be rude to them, saying things such as "Why were you late? Did you go to Libya?"⁸⁷ This was how vulnerable the trainees were to the suspicion of affiliation with the liberation movements, which were supported by Libya.

Eritrean elites who came to Addis Ababa in search of jobs did not find meritocracy at work. In fact, discriminatory practice as in Ethiopian Air Lines appears to have been unconcealed:

I used to work for Ethiopian Air Lines and in 1973 a memo came round that said no more Eritreans had to be hired. I read it myself. The in-flight manager frankly used to tell job applicants that he was not authorized to hire any more Eritreans.⁸⁸

Such discriminatory policies had a profound impact upon the political identity consciousness of Eritreans. They began to lose faith completely in Ethiopia and the Amhara power establishment:

Of all the events, there was one incident which was a turning point in my sense of self-identity. I dropped out of the university and wanted to be a pilot in the Ethiopian Air Lines. I was one of many Eritreans who passed the entrance exam. On the third day of classes, Zewde Bedada, the ground instructor, said something that was devastating to me: "Are all Eritreans born to be pilots? Some of you will have to be passengers." This was an insulting statement. Thereafter, Eritreans were elimi-

nated from the training program one after another, given all sorts of lame excuses. An Eritrean friend of mine was arrested for no reason immediately after his final flight for graduation, right as he landed the plane. And they got rid of me by claiming I had vertigo, something I could not disprove medically. That was the last stroke for me and I reached a conclusion that when the Amhara said Eritrea was Ethiopian, they meant the land, not the people.⁸⁹

Mass Eritrean political identity consciousness, therefore, began to develop when Eritreans met the Amhara. Communication, far from dissipating differences, exacerbated the social and cultural differences between the two instantly, marking the "us and them" boundary line.⁹⁰ The "us and them" boundary was further highlighted when Eritreans began to feel real or perceived Amhara economic, cultural and political predominance.

Yet, the pace of politicization of the Eritrean identity varied among the different ethnic and religious peoples in the country. Since Eritrea is an "unhistorical" nation, artificially created by the Italians, the emergence of a strong political identity was slowed down by the diversity of its peoples. In "unhistorical" nations linguistic and ethnic uniformity becomes an important criteria for nationhood.⁹¹

Even the very fact that the Amhara intruders were not treated as common enemies, bringing all Eritreans together instantly, is an indication, in and of itself, that it took the different peoples of Eritrea time to see one another as allies. For instance, the Eritrean struggle for independence started as a sectarian Islamic movement with an ideology of *jihad* (holy war) and pan-Arabism. The pioneer leaders of the armed struggle, Idris Mohammed Adem and Osman Saleh Sabbe, for instance, consciously avoided the legendary leader Wolde-ab because he was a Christian.⁹²

Tigray: Awakening from A Long Slumber?

Since the brutal suppression of the *Weyane*, the Tigrayans had been placid, taking the intermittent scourges of drought and

famine as acts of God. Pursuant with its policy of weakening Tigray, the regime did not undertake any economic investment in the region. Nor did it make any serious attempt to alleviate their poverty. According to the former hereditary ruler of Tigray, *Ra'esi* Mengesha Seyoum, every effort made to ameliorate the economic conditions of the people was blocked by the regime.⁹³ There was only one high school in the entire region even as late as the mid 1960s.

Surprisingly, the limited schooling in Tigray produced some of the most dynamic leaders of the Ethiopian student movement. The dynamic and ambitious Tigrayans were disproportionately represented in the leadership of the student movement, one of the most radical student movements in the Third World. Perhaps, it was their destitute economic background and the extreme neglect of their homeland by the Amhara state that precipitated them to center stage of the Ethiopian student movement. These committed Tigrayan activists were the leading university students whom Ali Mazrui called "the most radical African students I had ever addressed." "The mass of humanity" that turned up to Ali Mazrui's professorial lecture in December 1973, "was making the most direct and most blunt critique of an African government I had ever heard students anywhere."⁹⁴

The majority of the students were Amhara. In the 1960s, 75% of the university students came from Shoa, Eritrea and Harrar. Tigray and the other ten regions shared the remaining 25% among themselves.⁹⁵ Yet, despite their minuscule representation, Tigrayans were visible and many of the well known student leaders of the time such as Tilahun Gizaw, Berhane-Mesqel Redda, Meles Tekle, etc. came from Tigray.

By the late 1960s, the size of the small, but restless, ambitious and dynamic, intelligentsia of Tigray was swelling. And towards the end of the decade two significant developments took place in the region. One, directly attributed to the disgruntled intelligentsia, was the Tigrayan cultural renaissance. The other was the stunning rise of the Tigrayan soccer team into a respectable position in the country. Since the standard of sports in a region usually reflects its socio-economic development, finding a formidable soccer team in an impoverished

Tigray looked anomalous. Both of these events had cataclysmic effects in the awakening of urban youth consciousness. Expressing what James Scott calls "hidden transcripts,"⁹⁶ folk music and soccer games carried the cumulative and swelling grievances of the Tigrayan elites, which were powder kegs for inter-ethnic conflict, waiting for a boiling point.

Bahli Tigray: The Amhara political and economic supremacy over Tigray was reinforced by cultural domination which, as in other contexts,⁹⁷ exacerbated public grievances. Consequently, the political and cultural dimensions of identity became congruent with each other. And as such, the cultural basis of identity as a source of power and the appeal of nationalism becomes discernible.⁹⁸

Most national armed conflicts are preceded by cultural renaissance and Tigrayan romantic intellectuals promoted national identity by waging "cultural war" against the dominant Amhara culture. Their political goal was long term.⁹⁹ The Tigrayan cultural revival initially took the form of promoting folk music.

Two university students, Abebe Tessema and Desta Bezabeh, founded *Bahli Tigray* (Tigrayan Folk Troupe) in 1969-1970 to reclaim the culture of the people, which had been under constant siege by the Amhara culture. Reviving the culture meant preventing the national identity from perishing.

Folk poems and music were collected and shown on stages all over Tigray, and in Asmara and Addis Ababa. To see their folk culture on stage for the first time was very exciting. Many wept. In Asmara, the public reception was so strong that after the first show in *Cinema Odeon*, the troupe was banned. The Amhara governor of Eritrea, Asrate Kassa, realized that Tigrayan cultural revival would bring Tigray and Eritrea closer.¹⁰⁰

Bahli Tigray paved the way for cultural self-awareness, inspiring people to show interest in their own language, culture, traditions and history. People began to write in Tigrinya and challenge the legitimacy of Amarinya's sole claim to be a "literary language." Such cultural revival, which is the supreme achievement of romantic intellectuals,¹⁰¹ creates fertile ground

for the upcoming war of liberation.¹⁰² Indeed, *Bahli Tigray* was designed to be a vehicle for political ends.¹⁰³

Soccer: Sports activities, generally, reflect the socio-economic level of communities. In any given country, sports activities tend to excel where resources to support sports persons are available. Thus in Ethiopia, Shoa and Harrar, the two most favored regions by the state, and Eritrea, a former European colony, had good soccer teams. They were in the First Division while the rest of the regions were in the Second Division.

As pointed out earlier, Tigrayans were not allowed to use their language in literature, schools or other public duties. There were no local newspapers because, according to Gellner, "The Amhara empire was a prison-house of nations if ever there was one."¹⁰⁴ Thus, soccer became the major avenue along which Tigrayans could construct their community. In the stadium, where even the cheering crowds become symbols of their community, the "imaginings" appear more real.¹⁰⁵ The emotions that suffused the stadiums as the Tigrayan team played were powerful. Although the unharnessed emotions that the soccer matches generated did not lead to conflicts of the magnitude of the war between El Salvador and Honduras in 1970 that claimed 6,000 lives,¹⁰⁶ fist-fighting between Tigrayan and Amhara spectators was not uncommon. The Tigrayan imagined community appeared even more real as their team won.

In 1967, the October "Crown Cup" was won in the first division by Eritrea and in the second division by Tigray. The emergence of the most impoverished and least favored region into prominence was breathtaking for its fans. Worse still, the triumph of the two Tigrinya-speaking regions was symbolically damaging to the Amhara sense of dominance and to their intolerance of diverse cultures.

The regime designed a strategy whereby both regions could no longer be champions at the same time. By arguing that Tigray's soccer capability had developed, it was decided to promote it to the first division - an honorable banishment to obscurity. Success was rewarded with punishment disguised as promotion. In the first division there was no way impoverished Tigray could compete against more advanced and more

"urban" regions of Harrar, Shoa and Eritrea. In any case, if both Tigray and Eritrea were in the first division it meant that only one of the two Tigrinya-speaking regions could possibly be a champion.

In obscure banishment known as first division, Tigray could hardly excite spectators. Thereafter, it was denied the only legal arena to boost its self-image, to the dismay of its fans. When its anachronous status in the first division became too obvious, the Ethiopian Soccer Federation decided in 1973 to return it to the second division where it belonged. And it won the championship immediately. Win or lose, the stadium continued to be the only legal battlefield where the players and spectators played out their hidden agenda.

The War Over "Y": Tigrayans call their homeland "Tigray" and the Amhara called it "Tigre" which, per force, became the official name. The struggle over the name boiled down to basically the letter "Y", although the Tigrinya letter is different. The imposition of the name "Tigre" upon their homeland reminded the people of the Amhara political, economic and cultural hegemony. Resenting the name came to symbolize resisting the Amhara establishment. And "Tigray" became a diacritical signal that showed identity in the Barthian sense.¹⁰⁷

At the start of the national soccer tournament in Addis Ababa on October 28, 1973, the fourteen regions were given boards with their names and the year they became members of the Soccer Federation. The players had to parade carrying the boards in the stadium. The Tigrayans were given a board with the name "Tigre" on it. To the uproar and dismay of the Amhara officials, they changed the name on the board to "Tigray" and participated in the parade. The penalty was severe: Tigray and its players were banned until and unless they accepted the name "Tigre."¹⁰⁸

The belated rebuttal was sharp. Tigrayans said they knew what their name was better than anybody else and they would continue to call their region as they have always known it to be: "To ban the Tigrayans from the national soccer tournament for adding the letter "Y" is to make a mountain out of a molehill. It appears that the Ethiopian Soccer Federation had been

looking for any excuse to punish Tigray for excelling in the tournament."¹⁰⁹ The political battle over adding and dropping a letter in a name continued, in the process politicizing people's identity.

Banned, Tigrayans, who had no media and printing technology, were now denied the only means of imagining their community - that of participating in a national soccer tournament. They were denied the only opportunity they had to relieve their suppressed emotions. It also meant a denial of access to a battlefield where they could fight a war, albeit a peaceful one, against the Amhara and excel. More importantly, the banishment was over who decided what their name should be - whether they should add or drop "Y" in the name of their homeland. It sparked immense emotions among the people, particularly among the youth. Thereafter, the name "Tigray" became a symbol of resistance against the Amhara domination. Loaded with the whole sense of Tigrayan identity, "Y" became the most powerful letter in the alphabet. Such peaceful squabbles immensely augmented and politicized identities of the people, particularly the youth.¹¹⁰

The Amhara, as a conquering and dominant ethnics, did not only have political and economic hegemony, but they were also dominant culturally which enhanced their own sense of ethnic awareness. State identification with the Amhara ethnics generated counter-nationalisms on the part of the dominated. Just as mass Croatian national consciousness developed only after the establishment of Yugoslavia,¹¹¹ Eritrea's national consciousness started after its merger with Ethiopia and Tigray's self-awareness began as the tentacles of the state power began to be felt in the periphery.

Notes

1. Trevaskis, 1960. p. 97.
2. *Hanti Ertra*. November 15, 1950.
3. Resolution 390 (V) A, December 2, 1950.
4. *Hanti Ertra*. May 31, 1950. p. 1.

5. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
6. Wolde-ab Woldemariam, "*Tehut Qal Selamta Ne Kebur Hezbi Ertra*," *Hanti Ertra*. April 1950. p. 1.
7. *Hanti Ertra*. February 11, 1950, p. 1.
8. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazette*. March 21, 1951. p. 1.
9. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazette*. May 1, 1952. p. 4.
10. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazette*. May 29, 1952. p. 2.
11. *Hanti Ertra*. October 3, 1951. p. 1.
12. *Hanti Ertra*. October 17, 1951, p. 1.
13. American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington, D.C. No. 361. March 20, 1947. See also No. 364. March 21, 1947.
14. *Hanti Ertra*. October 17, 1951. p. 1.
15. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2 1982.
16. *United Nations Official Records of the General Assembly. Fifth Session*, Vol. I, 19th September to 15 December 1950. p. 534.
17. *Hanti Ertra*. September 5 1951. p. 1.
18. John Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982. p. 4.
19. E. K. Francis, *Interethnic Relations*. New York: Elsevier, 1976. p. 34.
20. Wolde-ab's conversation with the American Consul, Edward Mulcahy. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. March 5, 1951.
21. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C., Despatch No. 36. September 24, 1952.
22. Interview: Blatta Gebreigziabher Gebremichael, RICE, Rome, August 23 1987. The Blatta joined the Unionist Party in 1946 and he founded its branch in Adi Qaala in 1948. For his brief biography see American Consulate, Asmara, to Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 77. December 22, 1952. On the Muslim League's protests against the arrival of Ethiopian troops see Despatch Nos. 28 and 57 of the same year.
23. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. March 5, 1951.
24. *Hanti Ertra*. January 17, 1953. See also American Consul, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington, D.C. Despatch

- No. 87. January 16, 1953.
25. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
 26. American Consul, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 126. May 15, 1953.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
 29. American Consulate, Asmara, to The Department of State, Washington DC. July 18, 1953.
 30. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
 31. American Consul, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 23. August 12, 1953.
 32. "United States-Ethiopian Relations," Department of State, Washington D.C. to Addis Ababa, Asmara, London, Paris, Rome CA-4535. February 23, 1954.
 33. For instance, two prominent leaders, Ibrahim Sultan and Idris Mohammed Adem, followed Wolde-ab's route to Egypt and joined him in Cairo in 1959. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch, No. 411. April 17 1959. In Cairo, the trio "implored" the U.S. to use its influence to make the U.N. investigate Eritrea's federal status. They also sent a letter to Dag Hammarskjold, U.N. Secretary-General, pleading with the U.N. for intervention. American Embassy, Cairo, to the Department of State, Despatch No. 330. November 30, 1959.
 34. "Hezbi Ertra Des Yebalka Sera Atiqom Leukateka," *Dehay Ertra*. May 28, 1954. pp. 1-2.
 35. Article 7, Item # 2 of the *Constitution of Eritrea* reads: "Eritreans shall participate in the executive and judicial branches and shall be represented in the legislative branch of the Federal Government in accordance with law and in the proportion that the population of Eritrea bears to the population of the Federation."
 36. The sudden imposition of Ethiopian tariff on numerous merchandise is blamed for adversely affecting the Eritrean economy. See the translation of a well illustrated editorial of *Giornale dell'Eritrea* (October 31, 1952) in Despatch No. 64. American

- can Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. November 6, 1952.
37. *Dehay Ertra*. March 26, 1954.
 38. *Zemen* (Eritrean Government paper) March 29, 1955. p. 1.
 39. Abraha Futur, "Etyopiya Wey Mot Di'na Zebalna's Woyke'a Etopiya'n Moten," *Dehay Ertra*. February 28, 1953. p. 2. Abraha Futur was one of the Committee Members of the "Ethiopico-Eritrean Unity Association" in Addis Ababa, the apparent precursor of the Unionist Party in Eritrea, who signed a petition on September 25, 1945, asking the "Great American People and Government" to support the Ethiopian cause at the conference of Foreign Ministers meeting in London. The petition said that Ethiopia's request had to be supported so that "the peoples of Eritrea may again resume their rightful place with their brothers and sisters in Ethiopia, and their three thousand year tradition of devotion to the Empire." American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. Enclosure no. 4 to Despatch no. 527. October 3, 1945. Like many others, this staunch Unionist was dismayed by Ethiopia's behavior and regretted his actions. In the late 1950s, he became a passionate opponent of Ethiopia so much so that he was among those arrested under Proclamation 1/55 which gave police powers to stifle civil liberty and freedom in Eritrea. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 71. April 1, 1958.
 40. Interview: Ahmed Tahir Baduri(48), Vice-Minister for Information and Culture. July 7, 1994. Asmara
 41. Interview: Blatta Gebreigziabher Gebremichael, RICE, Rome, August 23, 1987.
 42. *Zemen*. July 29 1955. p. 1.
 43. *Zemen*. August 9, 1955. p. 1.
 44. Quoted in Lloyd Elligson, "The Origins and Development of the Eritrean Liberation Movement," Robert L. Hess ed. *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopia*. Chicago, 1978. p. 614.
 45. *Zemen*. September 13, 1960.
 46. The Egyptian delegate in the U.N. in *Hanti Ertra*. May 3, 1950. p. 1.
 47. His deep knowledge of the language had earned him the title

- of "Father of Tigrinya," See America Consul, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 87. January 16, 1953.
48. Interview: Muktar Abdal Hayi (52), April 19, 1994 Axum.
 49. Interview: Alemseged Tesfai (49), June 17, 1994. Asmara.
 50. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, EPLF, Orotta. September 6, 1987.
 51. Interviews: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982; Gebrenegus Zeri'ae (49), July 5, 1994. Asmara.
 52. Interview: *Shambel Bashai* Tesfamariam Asgedom (72), July 16, 1994. Mendefera.
 53. *Zemen*. November 15, 1962.
 54. Interview: *Shambel Bashai* Tesfamariam Asgedom.
 55. Dawit W. Giorgis, *Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution*. Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1989. pp. 80-81.
 56. For the Emperor's speech see *Zemen*, November 26, 1962; and for Asfaha's see the previous issue of November 15, 1962.
 57. Interview: Askalu Menkerios (44), Head, Union of Eritrean Women. July 1, 1994. Asmara.
 58. On the political calculations of the marriage, see the explanations from the American Legation, Addis Ababa, to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 16. February 8, 1949 and the Priority Air Pouch 259 sent on April 13, 1951.
 59. Interview: *Blatta* Gebreigziabher Gebremichael. RICE, 1987.
 60. Wolde-ab Woldemariam, "Ertra Ne'men [?]" Part V, *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. May 29, 1947. p. 4. Emphasis original.
 61. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 109. March 12, 1954.
 62. See, for instance, *Zemen*. March 29, 1955.
 63. Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution*. London: Verso Editions and NLB. 1981. pp. 176-77.
 64. Interview: "A.B." June 22, 1994. Asmara. "A.B.", is a former revolutionary combatant, now a high-ranking Eritrean official. honoring his desire to remain anonymous, I have withheld his name, the name of the school where he got his post-graduate degree and the names of his guardians.
 65. "Ertra Ne'Ertraweyan Tekun", *Dehay Ertra*. February 7, 1953. p.1.
 66. Interview: Estifanos Afeworki (47), Director of Eritrean Air Aviation. July 7, 1994. Asmara. For Ibrahim Sultan the federali-

- zation of the purely domestic railway was not only "illegal" and "unconstitutional" but a clear vindication of his "suspicions that the Amhara would attempt to annex Eritrea." American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 57. October 30, 1952. On the Eritrean railroad strike, demanding the dismissal of the Ethiopian management, see Despatch Nos. 75 (January 14, 1954), 77 (January 22, 1954) and 92 (February 10, 1954).
67. Interview: Blatta Gebreigziabher Gebremichael. RICE.
 68. Interview: Alganesh Kidane (35), June 22, 1994. Asmara.
 69. Interviews: e.g. Zemehret Yohannes (38), June 5, 1994. Asmara; Estifanos Afeworki.
 70. Chief Secretary of the Military Administration Head Quarters to Civil Affairs Branch, General Head Quarters, Middle East Forces. March 9, 1945. War Office 230-131.
 71. Memorandum: from Eritrean Director of Transport, May 1, 1943. War Office 230-131.
 72. Eritrean Annual Report For 1949. Asmara. 31st December 1949, Copy # 113, p. 36.
 73. J.F.P. Maclaren, Chief Secretary, to Civil Affairs Branch General Head Quarters, Middle East Forces. June 25, 1945.
 74. Haile Gebretu, "Zetehaba'e Keytegalts... Berhan Keywetse Zeterif Yelen," *Hanti Ertra*. March 25, 1950. p. 1.
 75. Qegnazmatch Berhanu Ahmedin, "Melsi Beza'eba El Rabita Islamiya," *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. May 29, 1947. p. 2.
 76. Interview: Alemseged Tesfai.
 77. Interview: Estifanos Afeworki.
 78. Gerard Chaliand, *Revolution in the Third World*. New York: The Viking Press, 1977. p. 5.
 79. On the concept of modernization, see Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968. pp. 32-39.
 80. Interview: "A.B."
 81. How feudal manners such as bowing disappeared from Eritrea is not clear, especially in light of the minimal impact of Italian colonial rule in the countryside. Even in the 1880s, just prior to the advent of colonialism, such manners were deeply entrenched in Kebessa. The ruler of Gura and its fourteen neighboring villages, a Sheikh, for instance, "evolved a very graceful Abyssin-

ian salaam" to greet visitors in southern the *Kebessa*. Describing these salutations, the American colonel, Dye, said:

The most noticeable is that of an inferior person to one of exalted station. He bends over until his head nears his knees, each forward motion being accompanied by a revolution of his arms over his head, and then gracefully falling to his legs. The notion of each hand is somewhat similar to a Turkish salaam; but the backs, instead of the palms, of the hands appear in front. (William Dye, *Moslem Egypt and Christian Abyssinia*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1880. p. 247.)

82. "A.B." belonged to a generation of youth who even as high school students, according to their American teachers, were "very sophisticated in their political thinking. And the majority of them resent saluting the Ethiopian flag and the efforts of the school to instill Ethiopian patriotism into them ... Instead of producing Unionist advocates, [the Amhara] appear so far only to have fostered the growth of a group of Young Turks." American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington D.C. Despatch No. 79. June 13 1957.
83. Barth, 1969. pp. 9-17.
84. Interview: Yitbarek Habtegiorgis (46), June 13, 1994. Asmara.
85. Interview: Adhanom Gebremariam (45), July 11, 1994. Mendefera.
86. Ibid.
87. Interview: Estifanos Afeworki.
88. Interview: Askalu Menkerios.
89. Interview: Yitbarek Habtegiorgis.
90. Enloe, 1973. p. 162; Barth, 1969; Connor 1972. pp. 328-29.
91. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. p. 102.
92. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, RICE, Rome, November 2, 1982.
93. Mengesha Seyoum, "Zelaqi Sela'am Endinor ..." in *Tobiya*. # 10, 1994. pp. 5-7.
94. Ali Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1978. p. 262.
95. Randi Ronning Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The Intellectual and Social Background, 1952-1977*. East Lansing: Michigan

- State University, 1985. pp. 44-45.
96. Scott, 1990.
 97. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*. p. 141.
 98. Smith, 1991. p. VII.
 99. Interview: Abebe Tessema, January 1, 1996. Washington D.C. He and Desta Bezabeh (see below) were the Tigrayan students of the then Haile Selassie I University who founded the folk group Bahli Tigray.
 100. Interview: Desta Bezabeh, June 4 1994. Addis Ababa; Abebe Tessema, January 1, 1996. Washington D.C. Both Abebe and Desta were summoned by the Security for questioning as to why the folk show was not introduced in Amaringa.
 101. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*. p. 73.
 102. Gellner, 1983. p. 57.
 103. Interview: Abebe Tessema.
 104. Gellner, 1983. p. 85.
 105. Hobsbawm, 1990. pp. 142-43.
 106. Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Soccer War*. New York: Knopf, 1991. pp. 157-185.
 107. Barth, 1969. p. 14.
 108. Abetew Gebreyesus, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office and Vice President of the Ethiopian Soccer Federation, Addis Ababa, to Tigray Soccer Federation, Mekelle. November 26, 1973 (Hedar 17 1966). Ref. # 415/34/66.
 109. The Tigray Soccer Federation, Mekelle to the Ethiopian Soccer Federation, General Assembly, Addis Ababa. May 5, 1974 (Mega-bit 28 1966). # 118/3/66.
 110. Interview: Tsegay Berhe (40), Deputy Administrator of Tigray. April 11, 1994. Mekelle.
 111. Hobsbawm, 1990.

MOBILIZATION AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION



Eritrea: Perennial Quest for Identity

Eritrea incorporated different ethnies that did not have a common past. And not until after the departure of the Italians did some elites begin to feel the imperatives of a pan-Eritrean identity that would foster the demand for independence. The need for common symbols was so urgent that even the Muslim League, a sectarian party, hero-worshiped *Ra'esi* Woldemichael Solomon,¹ a *Kebessa* Christian even though he was the worst scourge of the *Metahit* Muslims.

The Muslim League promoted Woldemichael to a heroic status in a desperate quest for the relevant grist to invent identity which would bolster the argument for independence. This foreshadowed the pervasive rewriting of history that characterized the armed struggle era. An important step in the invention of an Eritrean identity, the Muslim League perceptively calculated as early as the 1940s, was the need to draw a cleavage at the Mereb between the *Kebessa* and Tigray, the very political boundary the Italians and the Amhara emperor of Ethiopia, Menelik II, demarcated.

It was very easy for the Muslim League to distance itself from Tigray for there was nothing in common between the people south of the Mereb and the *Metahit*, where the League was deeply rooted. In fact, aversion to Tigray must have been axiomatic because *Metahit* Muslims knew Tigrayans were strong Christians and the Muslims among them were discriminated against. For the *Kebessa*, on the other hand, burying their trans-Mereb sense of identity was not as easy as it was for the *Metahit*.

Despite the primordial ties that glued the *Kebessa* to the Tigrayans, Wolde-ab's trans-Mereb "Tigray-Tigrignie" *risorgimento* nationalism and its slogan "Eritrea for Eritreans" slipped into an "Eritrean" nationalism covering only the region north of the Mereb. This slippage was consolidated in the armed struggle which was started in 1961 by *Metahit* Muslims who had minimal affinity with *Kebessa*, much less with Christian Tigray. Thus during the armed struggle, the nationalists had no hesitation in defining Eritrea north of the Mereb. Further, the "colonial" version of the Eritrean question could gain currency only if it referred to the former *La Colonia Primogenita*. The political and legal dimensions of the question could also be valid only if Eritrea excluded Tigray. With Tigray as part of Eritrea, though, the "colonial" argument would lose credibility, looking more like the secession of Biafra and Katanga than an anti-colonial struggle like that of Algeria and Angola.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which started the armed struggle, was a sectarian Islamic movement whose ideology was pan-Arabism. Presenting Eritrea as an appendage of the Islamic and Arab World, the ELF believed that "the Eritrean Revolution is, and must be, a Muslim Revolution, or a Revolution of the Muslims and for the Muslims alone."²

During the 1940s political squabbles, Muslim Eritreans preferred Arabic, which was spoken by a negligible section of their population, as their official language. The only Arabic-speaking group are the Rashaida on the coast consisting of 0.5% of the population. Yet, Arabic symbolized the Islamic identity in relation to the Christian "others." The reaffirmation of Arabic as the language of the Eritrean people by the ELF during the armed struggle confirmed the sectarian nature of its revo-

lution. Such a claim was only a part of the overall project of inventing a distinct identity:

The leadership of the Eritrean Revolution, in observance of the organic cultural, historical and political relations that link the Eritrean people with the Arab Nation, stressing the common struggle against Zionism, and appreciating the unlimited support donated by Arab countries to the Eritrean Revolution in all fields, the leadership of the revolution shall reinforce and consolidate these relations of brotherhood and struggle.³

This sectarian movement prevented the emergence of a pan-Eritrean identity. Continuous with the 1940s political squabbles, the ELF remained apprehensive of the *Kebessa* in the armed struggle, denying them key positions. The ELF leader, Idris Mohammed Adem, for instance, consistently turned down Wolde-ab's request to join the struggle, despite his superb nationalist credentials. The zealous Muslim leaders of the ELF used religion as a divisive factor among the rank-and-file fighting forces, too.⁴

In the early 1970s, following power struggle within the ELF, splinter groups broke away. A group which emerged in 1973 became known in 1977 as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, a vicious civil war between the ELF and EPLF dogged the liberation struggle. What ended the civil war was the involvement of the TPLF on the side of the EPLF. Neither the TPLF nor the EPLF publicly admit this. In fact, in my research, it was one of the touchiest issues for the EPLF and they deny the involvement of the TPLF "foreign" forces on their side. They claim that they alone cleared the ELF forces out of Eritrea.

During my research, the TPLF admitted fighting the ELF and argued that it was the ELF that initiated the conflict inside Tigray. It had allied itself with the monarchist Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the leftist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and repeatedly attacked the TPLF. Thus, the TPLF leaders contend that it became a matter of self-defence to attack the ELF: "Was there a military coordination be-

tween the EPLF and TPLF? That is entirely a different matter."⁵ In addition to the immediate concern of self-defence, some argued, there was also the long-term Tigrayan self-interest of saving the Eritrean revolution:

There was cooperation militarily, not out of sheer desire to support the EPLF, but out of self-interest ... As the ELF was attacking the EPLF, the *Dergue* was very strong and it was preparing for its major offensive [Operation Red Star/Sixth Offensive]. The ELF attacks on the EPLF created favorable conditions for the *Dergue*. The ELF even abandoned a fortification it used to share with the EPLF, in effect, giving the *Dergue* a free ride. Declaring a war against the EPLF, at the time, was tantamount to allying oneself with the *Dergue* and the Eritrean revolution was at a serious risk. The collapse of the Eritrean revolution was not going to have a pleasant effect on our self-interests.⁶

The dialectical relationship between the Eritrean and Tigrayan insurgencies, therefore, caused the TPLF to worry about the internecine and ferocious civil war between the ELF and EPLF. And whereas the *Dergue* wanted to see the civil war continue until the two Fronts exhausted their energies, TPLF self-interests dictated that the civil war had to end. Contrary to what the ex-combatants admit, the TPLF intervention appears to have had a decisive role in ending the 11-year civil war. Without the TPLF intervention, it is difficult to imagine how and when it would have come to an end. Similarly, with the civil war raging, it would have been impossible to defeat the *Dergue*.

In any case, irrespective of the means, the end of the costly civil war was welcomed by most Eritreans. It is a popular saying that the toll it took was heavier than the toll which fighting the government took. This was the heavy price Eritreans had to pay for the lack of a primordial pan-Eritrean identity.

Eritrea: The Rough Road to the Invention of Identity

Armed struggle requires mobilizing the masses. Eritrean political elites introduced social reforms that righted wrongs and allowed the people to air all kinds of grievances.

Political Grievances: The insurgents ventilated the major grievances which had festered during the federal era (1952-1962). They presented the termination of the federation as the most powerful cause of the armed struggle:

The Eritrean people tried to resist the crude strangulation of their autonomy and the imminent political murder of their country through peaceful means, including public demonstrations, protests and petitions to the U.N. In 1958, Eritrean workers staged a massive nationwide demonstration of protests ... Haile Selassie's response was to order the barbaric massacre of the workers in which over 550 were brutally murdered. The Eritrean labor movement, which had historically spearheaded the struggle for independence was thus suppressed by force of arms. This barbaric act signified the end of any hopes for the peaceful resolution of the Eritrean independence question and pointed to armed struggle as the only way out of the colonial oppression ...⁷

The EPLF convincingly argued the illegality of the abrogation of the U.N.-sponsored federation. The constitution did not give the Eritrean parliament the mandate to abrogate it. Even if the parliament illegally terminated it, the federal government should have intervened. And any major changes in the status of the federation should have required the approval of the U.N.⁸

The peasantry were not well versed with the idea and practice of federation, but the urban population were more aware and appreciative of their autonomous status. The liberal political atmosphere of the 1940s was too recent to fade from their memory. And yet, political grievances as expressed in the abrogation of the federation had appeal mostly to urban elites. As such, Eritrea is a case where the ingredients for political

grievances such as the gross violation of basic rights and crude strangulation of a U.N-guaranteed distinct status were fresh in people's minds, but failed to spark emotions when political entrepreneurs employed them for mobilization. Thus the rational actors set in motion a course of politically-motivated reading of history. The past, which was not only revisited and revised but also manufactured, along with the constant refreshing of memories of the unspeakable atrocities committed by the Amhara regime constituted what Liisa Malkki calls "mythico history."⁹

Administrative Grievances: The Amhara officials who were in charge of administration had no accountability to the people whom they treated as mere subjects. In fact, their rule was imposed upon the people, treating them as foreign subjects in all aspects of the socio-political spectrum. Even at trifling social occasions such as soccer matches, the people were made to feel as if they were foreign subjects in their own homeland, so much so the head of state lamented that this was counter productive: "Whenever the *Shoan* and Eritrean soccer teams play in Addis Ababa and Asmara, the soldiers are deliberately sent for fist-fighting [against Eritreans]. This has backfired on us because it turned out to be a good tool for the bandits."¹⁰

In marked contrast, in the liberated areas the EPLF was establishing people's councils known as *baitos*, which were in charge of administering their communities. The *baitos*, where ethnic and religious groups were fairly represented,¹¹ were accountable to the people who elected them.¹² By setting up this new political and administrative structure in its liberated areas, the EPLF managed to lay the foundations of a government in the peasant world. This strategy is followed by most Third World revolutions such as Amílcar Cabral's in Guinea-Bissau.¹³

Economic Grievances: Italian capital and technology flowed into Eritrea when the Italians decided to make it a stepping-stone for a larger colonial project. Then, Eritrean towns looked more modernized than Ethiopian towns, including the capital, Addis Ababa, which had a predominantly rural character. Notwithstanding the marginalization of natives during the colo-

nial rule, the revolutionary elites argued that before Eritrea joined Ethiopia, it used to be the most industrialized country in the region:

Thirty years ago Eritrea had industries that produced bottles and glasses, matches, beer, wine and other alcoholic drinks, paper, soap, oil, powder, biscuits and other food items, cigarettes, etc. Despite the arresting and destructive steps the British and Ethiopian governments took, Eritrea in 1970 had 169 major industrial infrastructures that produced vital goods.¹⁴

Here, nothing is said about the fact that none of these industries were owned by Eritreans. Nor was the war economy that necessitated Italian investment mentioned. Instead, the EPLF argued that since Ethiopia's "colonial" policy was to impoverish Eritrea, the industries in Eritrea had been closed and/or transplanted into "Amharaland."¹⁵

Yet, when interviewing, none of the political elites who take for granted the claim of transplanting industries into "Amharaland,"¹⁶ could name industries that were transplanted in Shoa. Understandably, the force exerted on industries to transplant to Shoa could have been subtle, making the allegation difficult to substantiate. Another complaint every ex-combatant is quick to make is that, in the 1960s FIAT and Volkswagon wanted to locate car assembly plants in Decamhare, southern Eritrea, but were denied a permit and told they could only install the plants in Shoa. The veracity of this claim is also difficult to establish. For the combatants, though, it is axiomatic. Fact or perception, the grievance has served the purpose of ventilating nationalism.

Eritrea has never been known for its mineral wealth. Neither the Italians nor the British were particularly impressed by the wealth of its mineral deposits.¹⁷ This reality was noted by natives such as Wolde-ab who argued in the 1940s that given its unenviable lack of mineral deposits, neither the Europeans nor the Americans would want Eritrea. It was Ethiopian, Wolde-ab stated, and had to be returned to Ethiopia.¹⁸ On the contrary, by providing a long list of mineral deposits that suppos-

edly existed in Eritrea, the EPLF claimed their country could be self-reliant.¹⁹

Social Services and Reforms: Nationalists simultaneously undertake social reforms to improve the lot of the people. Land reform, literacy campaigns, irrigation, health services, etc., improve the conditions of the peasantry and make the task of mobilization easier for revolutionary elites.²⁰ In Eritrea, although the landholding system had not been a primary source of grievances, in some areas land reform was found to be necessary. In liberated Afabet and its vicinity,²¹ She'eb²² and Maria Tselam,²³ land was taken away from a handful of lords and redistributed among landless peasants.

In the liberated areas, schools were opened and a literacy campaign was launched. In the medical field, too, the EPLF were engaged in training health workers.²⁴ Stationary and mobile clinics with barefoot doctors were established. Free healthcare was the declared policy,²⁵ and an underground central chemical laboratory and a hospital were set up.²⁶

When Eritrea suffered drought and famine in the 1980s, the EPLF's Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) played a pivotal role in supporting the starving people in the liberated areas.²⁷ They dug wells and encouraged the use of irrigation, as well as distributing food aid.²⁸

The peasants were thus convinced that the EPLF were friends in need. In stark contrast, the regime's destructive behavior, ranging from burning villages such as She'eb to cutting trees²⁹ with the intent to weaken the ecology, reinforced the fear that it was doing all it could to destroy them. As the state's behavior alienated the people, the EPLF aptly sloganized: "We build, the enemy destroys."

Tigray: An Identity in Quest of a Political Definition

Because of Tigray's relative homogeneity, the TPLF cultivated ethnic nationalism as a tool of mobilization fairly easily.³⁰ Like the EPLF, the TPLF ventilated political, cultural and economic grievances, simultaneously introducing socio-economic reforms in their liberated areas.

Economic Grievances: For the TPLF, the destitute economic standard of Tigray was the outcome of generations-old political manipulation by the Amhara. It argued that no capital had been allocated to develop mining, industries and agriculture in the region. Banks were giving loans to Amhara businessmen on condition they only invested them in the "Amharaland." Tigrayan businessmen were victims of discriminatory policies, denied loans and, at times, licences. Roads were bad. Tigrayan towns were not meant to prosper. Taxes from Tigray were taken to Shoa.³¹

Whereas the poverty of Tigray was a grievance the TPLF used for mobilizing the peasantry, the state unwittingly used it as a counter-argument for denigrating the Tigrayan ethnîe. In 1989, President Mengistu Hailemariam spoke in typically derogatory terms about Tigray:

Out of the 2.6 [TPLF claims 5.0] million people living in Tigray, 89.7% lives on farming and only 39.6% of the landmass is arable. Not enough food is produced. Further, the region is the most frequently visited by drought and famine. The 1974 Revolution came for the people of Tigray who have been subjected to starvation, disease, emigration and death ... Disease, starvation, death and emigration are part and parcel of the life of Tigrayans ... Thus one can even say the Tigray region, in and of itself, is a cause of the Revolution ...

The electricity of the region uses fuel that our country does not produce but we make it available to the people at a very high cost. Industrial products such as razor blades, matches, soap, medicine, etc. are provided to the people from other regions of the country ...

Tigray has never been self-sufficient in terms of food or finance ... It cannot even cover the cost of papers and chalks the schools in the region need.

As of now we will only have a choice between destruction and progress for the people of Tigray ...³²

Such a speech by the head of state against his own fellow citizens further alienated the people. They felt seriously insulted

when they were told their homeland could not even finance "chalks for its schools." It was a major source of propaganda for the TPLF which categorized the speech as a continuation of the traditional animosity and aversion the Amhara ruling classes had always had towards Tigray.

Mengistu used poverty as a means of promoting a propaganda of Tigrayan economic inferiority. The TPLF, too, used poverty as a political stick. By placing the onus of responsibility for Tigray's backwardness on the discriminatory policy of the Amhara, the TPLF followed an economic policy of self-reliance in its liberated areas, something the regime had to acknowledge, as a security report noted:

TPLF organizes markets in its liberated areas and exports local products such as sheep, goats, oxen, honey, butter, sesame, spices and cereals via the Sudan and the Red Sea to the outside world. They control the saltmining region of Berahle and have established farm areas in Raya Azebo, Sheraro, Welqait and Tselemti. Cottage industries for products such as edible oil were also planted in the liberated areas. They import contraband goods and buy arms. These activities have not only been sources of income to the TPLF but a means of winning the popular masses. Hence their slogan: "Food from our people, weapons from our enemies."³³

Instead of seeking a non-military solution, the state appears to have resigned itself to the notion that "There is a direct correlation between a perilous physical environment and the ecology of insurgency"³⁴:

The people of the region [Tigray] have a *natural tendency* to withstand hardship. That bandit forces were raised from such people means they have the capacity to stay alive and fight for long with only a little food provision. Further, due to the frequent drought in the region, the peasants could not see a difference between living by farming the land and joining the bandits. Thus they were abandoning their farmland to join the bandits and

this contributed to the growth and strength of the bandit group ...³⁵

Reforms: The administrative, social and cultural reforms undertaken by the TPLF were almost identical to those of the EPLF. As in Eritrea, the Amhara administrative structures were replaced by self-administrative institutions known as *baitos* at *wereda* (sub-district) level. The *baitos* dealt with justice, security, mobilization, commerce, agriculture, crafts, education, health, and relief committees.³⁶ Such policies effectively undermined the *Dergue*, as this security report shows:

In the long-liberated areas such as Zana, Gerhu Senay, Adi Da'ero, Adi Gabru, Endaba Tсахема, Feres May and Habst *weredas*, they [TPLF] have appointed administrators who can administer the people according to their wishes and traditions. As such, the TPLF has managed to win the confidence of the people so much so that now it is the people who can fight for it.³⁷

One of the reforms the TPLF introduced was equal treatment of women who were given roles in farming, administration, the judiciary etc. - areas that used to be exclusively left for men.³⁸ This new attitude towards women was symbolized by the part they played in the armed struggle. One third of the TPLF's fighting forces were women who were not only loyal combatants but also the most effective at liaison with the peasant masses, as they showed immediate concern for the daily problems of the peasants.³⁹

Cultural oppression was also targeted during the armed struggle. In both Eritrea and Tigray, *Amharanization* had sought to strangle the identity of the people. And the nationalists reacted by trying to develop the suppressed culture of the people, which ended up being an effective mobilizing tool. The practice of using their own language and history, helped the people develop their self-confidence.⁴⁰ The effectiveness of folk culture as a mobilizing tool was admitted by the state itself:

Most of the TPLF army is made of peasant forces who do not know why they are fighting. Due to their low level of political consciousness, they were only intoxicated by folk music.⁴¹

WARFARE, MASS VIOLENCE AND PROPAGANDA

Military Success

Military defeats undermined the confidence people had in the state. The lightening guerrilla hit-and-run tactics had given the EPLF and TPLF a mythic image of invincibility. In 1982, for instance, the *Dergue* launched the biggest offensive ever against the EPLF in what it called "Operation Red Star". It vowed to finish the war "once and for all" in 90 days. Special propaganda was broadcast for months to this effect. Resources were channelled to the operation and the regime sloganized "Everything to the war front." New and high-tech weapons were acquired from the U.S.S.R. and the military plan was drawn by Soviet generals.⁴² Against all odds, the three months did not mark the end of the war. The survival capacity of the EPLF was self-evident and the counter-propaganda by the EPLF was effective:

This is the longest and the most bitter war. It is a time that tests the resilience of the EPLF and the Eritreans, a time to identify friends and supporters on the one hand, and enemies and collaborators on the other. Teaching [us] a big lesson and experience, it ["Operation Red Star"] marks an unforgettable chapter in the course of the just struggle of the Eritrean people.⁴³

The collapse of such offensives, preceded by massive propaganda was a crushing blow to the regime and a morale boost to the fighters who seized modern tanks and ammunition mortars. It bolstered their mythic image of invincibility.

The regime knew the TPLF was supporting the EPLF in Naqfa during Operation Red Star and it decided to launch similar offensives in Tigray, hoping the Tigrayans had exhausted

their energy in Eritrea. The offensive collapsed, augmenting the stature of the TPLF. The youth were lured by the military victories and the TPLF was only too willing to share its successes with the people: "The people of Tigray are proud of their Tigrayan-ness. When they are provoked, they react angrily and instantly like a leopard. This is what objective history writers cannot deny."⁴⁴

The dramatic operations undertaken by the Fronts in urban centers during broad daylight also promoted their mythic image. Dubbed "hope and pride to the residents of Asmara," it was a big propaganda bonanza when EPLF commandos entered Asmara on May 21, 1984, and destroyed 30 fighter planes within 90 minutes.⁴⁵ Similar EPLF action in 1986 destroyed 40 fighter planes.⁴⁶

The TPLF's most striking action was "Operation Age'azi." Its commandos stormed the central prison of Mekelle on February 8, 1986, freeing 1,800 prisoners, most of whom were waiting to be killed.⁴⁷ They were faithful servants of the *Dergue*, arrested on suspicion of affiliation with the TPLF. For the TPLF, "Their sole 'crime' was that they happened to be Tigrayans. If there was any other reason for their arrest, it was the fact that they trusted the *Dergue* and gave it their services." Given an unexpected second chance of life, many of the ex-prisoners became some of the TPLF's most dedicated fighters.

In 1988, the *Dergue* encountered decisive defeats at the battles of Naqfa (Eritrea) and Shire (Tigray) which encouraged many civilians to join the Fronts. Both battles heralded the beginning of the end. Editorializing "The historical victory and its meaning," in its magazine *Sagem*, the EPLF predicted it was the beginning of the end. "For the first time since World War II," it said, "Soviet colonels were captured." One foreign observer, Basil Davidson, described it as "the most significant victory in the history of liberation movements since Dien Bien Phu in 1954."⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, such successes encouraged many youth to join the struggle as victory looked imminent and realistic.⁴⁹

The EPLF and TPLF amassed political benefits from their humane treatment of prisoners of war (P.O.W.s) which is "one of the chief characteristics of civilized warfare."⁵⁰ Tens of thou-

sands of P.O.W.s were released every now and then after receiving political education.⁵¹ The TPLF's "code of conduct forbade any unnecessary killing of enemy soldiers and prescribed the giving of water, food and medical care first to prisoners of war, before their own fighters." Hammond continued, "I must admit I was skeptical of these claims. Yet the prisoners of war I interviewed in the central hospital confirmed this treatment."⁵² What augmented the stature of the Fronts became worrisome to the state:

What is of major concern now is the question of prisoners of war who are being released by the bandits. The bandits are releasing them saying they are "oppressed" people ... We should reintegrate them in the army only after investigating them thoroughly ... What is also of concern is that the ex-prisoners believe that the TPLF does not kill prisoners ... This affects the morale of the fighting forces (because they will think they will return safely if captured) ...⁵³

The Fronts knew how to handle not only the populace but the P.O.W.s as well: "In Tigray, even the militia, after being trained and armed, were abandoning the army and joining the TPLF."⁵⁴ Indeed, the *Dergue* conceded as early as 1985 that "the TPLF managed to win the confidence of the people who can [now] fight for it."⁵⁵ The Fronts' policy towards P.O.W.s was in stark contrast with that of the *Dergue* which used to kill not only P.O.W.s but its own conscripts and regular soldiers when their performance was less than satisfactory. Mengistu commanded: "I am saying you must kill while you are fighting."⁵⁶

Conscription

As the savage war dragged on, incurring heavy losses on both sides, the *Dergue* decided to conscript to make up for its constant losses. Administrative regions were being ordered to provide conscripts who would be trained for 10 days before deployment.⁵⁷ With only minimal military training, imbued with no patriotism, kidnapped leaving children, wives, siblings and

parents behind and, above all, having no idea what they were fighting for, conscripts could hardly match the determined and principled guerrilla fighters. As in the case of the Russian conscript army in 1917, the *Dergue* conscripts were among the swiftest to disintegrate.⁵⁸

Conscription offered the Eritrean and Tigrayan youth limited options. Parents who hid their children so that they could avoid conscription would be jailed.⁵⁹ This fed into the EPLF and TPLF propaganda. "To die for the sake of fascism," the TPLF broadcast, "was a double death." By citing a Tigrinya maxim, "Before the flood reaches you, pave a new course and redirect the flood," the young people were invited to the field to avoid conscription. They could choose between going abroad, leading a civilian life in the liberated areas or joining the armed struggle.⁶⁰ Similarly, the EPLF advised the young people to join the struggle before they got conscripted by the *Dergue* to fight against "their own country and their own revolution."⁶¹

Presenting conscription as an aspect of national oppression, the TPLF argued that making Tigrayans fight fellow Tigrayans was not new; it was congruent with the tradition of the Amhara ruling classes. However,

to watch the youth of Tigray being taken by the Amhara ruling classes to their graves, is not something that is congruent with the history of the people of Tigray ... Submissiveness is not something that is highlighted in the history of our people ...

... Thus what has been engineered by the Amhara ruling classes to ruin the people of Tigray by forcefully taking their youth to war should be fought earnestly by the youth as well as adults of Tigray.⁶²

Conscription gave the youth an either-or choice and few, if any, chose to die for the *Dergue*. This made the EPLF's conscription a lot easier. All they needed to do was round up the young people and ask them and their crying parents whether they wanted to struggle for their country or to fight and die for the *Dergue*. Joining the EPLF was preferable of the two unpleasant options.

Genocidal-like State Behavior

Genocide is multi-faceted. Article II (c) of the 1948 U.N. Genocide Convention defines it as "Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." As such, its range varies from direct physical annihilation of elites and masses alike, to indirectly using famine as a weapon, conscription and "resettlement." For the coiner of the term, the Polish scholar Raphael Lemkin, its range goes even further than that:

Genocide is effected through a synchronized attack on different aspects of life of the captive peoples: in the political field (by destroying institutions of self-government); in the social field (by disrupting the social cohesion of the nation involved) and killing or removing elements such as the intelligentsia, which provide spiritual leadership ...⁶³

Famine: A Weapon of Mass Destruction

Wars follow ethical norms. Article 14 of the 1977 Geneva Protocol II, Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts, for instance, prohibited the starvation of civilians as a method of combat.⁶⁴ The *Dergue*, which did not abide by this spirit of humanism, operated policies detrimental to the livelihood of Eritrean and Tigrayan civilians. For instance, only a year after the deadly 1973-74 famine, it decided to launch a military offensive (Operation Raza) in Tigray and to buy food from the region to support its army.⁶⁵ Tigray had not yet recuperated enough from the devastating famine to have surplus food for the army. Buying whatever scarce food existed in the area to feed the army inevitably aggravated the precarious situation of the civilians. In Eritrea, too, the state officially decided to terminate food delivery to famine victims in 1975.⁶⁶

Another big famine struck Eritrea and Tigray in the mid 1980s. What made this famine more deadly than the former was that it was accompanied by a destructive war.⁶⁷ Famine

and war produced "one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century."⁶⁸ The *Dergue* considered this tragedy as propitious terrain to defeat its enemies. Three tactics were used against Tigray: indiscriminate mass violence against civilians, denial of food access to famine victims and deportation under the cloak of "resettlement."

Initially the *Dergue* hid the famine, but when the news leaked out, winning worldwide sympathy, it prevented international aid from reaching rebel-held regions, forcing aid workers to air-drop food or deliver it cross border from the Sudan.⁶⁹ The *Dergue* condemned aid as an intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign country. "If they want to enter via Sudan," the head of state forewarned aid donors, "then they will have to be responsible for what happens to them."⁷⁰ As such, the state regarded the famine as a nature-sent political opportunity: "Food control is as good a weapon as any. The *Dergue* ... has no qualms about striking the Tigrayans when they are down."⁷¹

On the other hand, the regime distributed food aid it received on behalf of famine victims to its own army. This fed the TPLF propaganda: "Thanks to the Amhara ruling classes, Tigray has never been free from famine for a very long time,"⁷² and civilians internalized the TPLF's characterization of the *Dergue* behavior as a policy of "draining the sea to kill the fish."

Exacerbating the *Dergue's* behavior was the EPLF's blockage of the road from the Sudan, through which food was reaching Tigrayan famine victims. This resulted from the frosty relationship between the EPLF and TPLF after their early 1980s honeymoon ended. What spoilt this honeymoon, created by the common blood they shed fighting the ELF in 1981 and the *Dergue* in the 1982 Operation Red Star, is mysterious. "Political differences" was the commonest answer elites gave, during my research. Deciphering the phrase, however, has not been easy. In apparent reference to the TPLF's short-lived flirtation with Albanian-style socialism, the EPLF's political department head said the "political differences" surfaced when the TPLF became bogged down in a Marxist ideological quagmire:

They tagged the Soviet Union "social imperialist" and they went out of their way to pressurize us to take a stand on what they called "Soviet social imperialism". Such hair-splitting of ideological concepts were not matters of concern to us ... They were merely manifestations of self-confidence crisis which the TPLF was suffering from.⁷³

The EPLF was also concerned about the TPLF's vague political goal. It could not endorse any tendency of Tigrayan separatism,⁷⁴ apparently, because it believed separation was a privilege for Eritrea alone, given its unique colonial background. Tigray's quest for independence would have diluted the "colonial" nature of the Eritrean question which, along with the Tigrayan, would have been dismissed as a quest for secession — with all the negative connotations of the word "secession." Further, the EPLF must have foreseen that unless a friendly TPLF sat on the seat of power in Addis Ababa, their quest for divorce would be too hard to realize.

TPLF informants gave even vaguer answers such as that the EPLF was not a "democratic" organization⁷⁵ and that it had "paternalistic" attitudes towards the TPLF.⁷⁶ Irrespective of the nature and causes of the squabbles, they led to the blockage of the road to the Sudan. EPLF informants refused to talk about it. The Eritrean Deputy Police Commissioner, Simon Gebre Dengil, for instance, responded in my survey, by saying there was no need to scratch old wounds. All TPLF informants, except one,⁷⁷ on the other hand, talk about it, and many with a forgiving tone. "The incident enabled us to see the nature of the EPLF," said Sebhata Negga, "but we could not harbor grudges against them when we had more fundamental issues in common."⁷⁸ Some (10.7%) of the 28 TPLF informants, however, bitterly equated the EPLF behavior with that of the *Dergue*:

... We had 60-100 trucks transporting food for famine victims in Tigray which were stranded in Sheraro when the EPLF blocked the road to the Sudan. The trucks were only 40 kilometers away from the *Dergue* army, a matter of three or four hours drive. And the EPLF refused

to let them go to the Sudan. Instead they offered to take them for themselves so that they would not fall in the hands of the *Dergue*. Finally we had to build a new road to the Sudan via Wolqait within seven days and nights and we saved the trucks. It was a miracle! In any case, the EPLF behavior was a savage act. It has passed and I do not hesitate to categorize it as a "savage act." It must be recorded in history like that! ... The Tigray people also called it "a savage act" and continued to look for solutions themselves. I, personally, ignored the incident by reminding myself that the EPLF is not an organization anything good can be expected of ... What could one say more than that? ... They closed the road for about two years and we had no access to the Sudan for one month until we built a new road ourselves. And that was at the height of the famine!⁷⁹

When both the *Dergue* and the EPLF blocked food aid from reaching famine victims, the TPLF stood by the side of the people who began to say "When we need food, they provide it."⁸⁰

Resettlement: A Weapon of Mass Destruction

The government is trying to kill us. In this new place we don't know the weather and we were given very little food.

— A Tigrayan peasant, Sudan, 1986⁸¹

I don't think there is anything that suits me better than the land my father gave me.

— A Tigrayan peasant, Sudan, 1986⁸²

Nature is cruel, therefore we, too, may be cruel

— Hitler ⁸³

Nature was cruel to the Eritreans and Tigrayans when the rains did not come and their regions were stricken by drought in the mid 1980s. The state used famine as an excuse to depopulate

Tigray in the name of resettlement-- a behavior compared with that of the Khmer Rouge.⁸⁴ It was an ambitious program of deporting 1.5 million people from the north, mainly Tigray, to the southern part of Ethiopia.⁸⁵

Villages near garrison towns used to be enclosed by the army, mostly at night or dawn, and their inhabitants herded into prisons and collection camps. Market places were also raided by soldiers who rounded up or kidnapped people to the resettlement sites in the remote south. Those who refused were beaten up and, not infrequently, killed.⁸⁶

The plan to abduct peasants and deport them was decided by top officials: "There cannot be voluntary resettlement. It must be forced."⁸⁷ And "the people to be resettled must be those who are physically fit."⁸⁸ Famine victims in camps such as Korem were denied food unless they accepted resettlement and "measures had to be taken against those who refused (to resettle)."⁸⁹

Resettlement was a politically motivated *de facto* deportation, and as the policy-makers admitted, it was not well planned. "The sites are not attractive. Those who have been resettled do not have clothes (and basic necessities such as salt)."⁹⁰ Thus, forcing Tigrayans to resettle was tantamount to giving the death warrant to an ethnic group, as the TPLF stated: "It was only designed to kill a people. It is a crime that will never be forgotten in history."⁹¹

In self-exoneration, in his book *Red Tears*, Dawit Wolde Giorgis, the head of the regime's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), which orchestrated the deportations, holds Legesse Asfaw, a leading *Dergue* member, responsible for the mismanagement of the resettlement. Indeed, Legesse's anti-Tigrayan feelings were so profound that he was lamenting "Not enough settlers have been available from Tigray to be transported to the south due to the counter agitation of the bandits."⁹² Dawit dumps the blame on Legesse:

In one instance, Legesse's hatred of Tigrayans resulted in a brutal criminal act ... To clear out the transit camp [in Debre Berhan], Legesse decided that able-bodied people with small numbers of children should go ahead

by bus [to the hot region of Gambella]. Most of us were reluctant; we didn't know how people would react to the heat. But Legesse insisted, adding that his instructions did not apply to the people from Tigray: every Tigrayan, old or young, sick, weak, or on his deathbed, was ordered onto the buses for the two-day journey. In effect, he condemned the old and sick Tigrayans to death.⁹³

With surprising candor, Dawit does not only characterize this as a "brutal criminal act" but appears to concur with how one of his colleagues characterized it: "genocide of helpless people."⁹⁴

Those who were flown by planes were also packed and "pressed together as tight as the fingers of my hand"⁹⁵ and many were trampled to death.⁹⁶ The tragedy for the Tigrayans did not end with such torturous journeys. Surviving the journey was only the first chapter of the ordeal. The next chapter began with the struggle to survive in an inhospitable context where there was no shelter, no food and no medication. Death became a normal everyday occurrence. The so-called resettlement sites were actually hell on earth.⁹⁷ Ultimately, the inevitable and the most dangerous final phase became the attempt to escape. The victims longed to return to their homeland, although it was war-torn and famine-stricken. The attempt to escape is difficult to imagine. Peasants who had generally spent their entire life in the very village where they were born and raised, found themselves deported to remote regions from which they tried to find their way back to their homeland. Some came to know that the only way they could reach Tigray was by crossing the border to the Sudan. Deciding "we would rather be eaten by wild animals,"⁹⁸ they began the trek to home via the Sudan which lasted up to a month.⁹⁹ Indeed, the dreadful flight through unfamiliar territory took its toll.

Tigrayan peasants who were damned by nature to drought and condemned by the *Dergue* were easy prey of wild animals. The emaciated died of starvation and disease. Those who survived both were abused by soldiers of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).¹⁰⁰ Only a fraction of the attempted es-

capees made it to Tigray. Other dangers included drowning in rivers and summary killing by *Dergue* cadres. "In one incident in December 1984," *Africa Watch* reports, "330 escaping settlers were burned to death when government soldiers set brush fires around their camp."¹⁰¹

Thus the regime offered the people two unpleasant choices — death by way of deportation or death by starvation in Tigray. In fact, even those abducted found hunger to be worse in the deportation sites than in Tigray. Then the TPLF decided to neutralize the *Dergue* policy of starving the people to submission by helping an estimated of up to 200,000 famine victims trek for 4-8 weeks to the Sudan.¹⁰² "One of the biggest migrations of the 20th century,"¹⁰³ it was conducted mainly at night for fear of aerial bombardment.

The compelling and sentimental reminiscences of the ordeal made by former guerrilla leader, now Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi, on the occasion of the 17th anniversary of the Tigrayan insurgency (February 18, 1992) is a snapshot of the tragedy:

Land betrayed us. Grains perished. There was no food. The enemy was stronger and was attacking us when we were suffering from famine — attack after attack. Starving people used to congregate around oak trees hoping to find food. The *Dergue* deported them to malaria-infested regions, dumping them in disease-afflicted areas. A hopeless situation of air bombardment upon famine! Conditions favored extinction. There cannot be a test worse than this. Man dies, man is born; a village is razed, a village sprouts; but when a people perish, that is a final loss!

... Then we let the people — from Raya [S.E. Tigray] to Adiabo [N.W. Tigray] — go to the Sudan. Only at night for fear of bombardment. In the Sudan, no food was readily available. There, too, people starved. Some died while waiting for food.

... Then hoping the rains would come, we asked those physically fit to return to Tigray — to the land of fire, to the land of bullets, to the land of death, to the

land of famine... The TPLF told them to plough the land again. The physically strong then flocked back to Tigray. Foreign observers objected to the return of famine-stricken and weakened people to a battle zone. [But, the peasants replied], "there cannot be Tigrayans without Tigray; no Tigray without Tigrayans. Whatever the price could be, we grip the land, we grip the mountains—however rough they may be! And we struggle for those mountains; we die and win for them! That is our plan." ...¹⁰⁴

Resettlement killed people at a faster rate than famine. In addition to the estimated 400,000 people who died of famine, mainly the creation of state military policy, resettlement killed 50,000-100,000 people.¹⁰⁵ This tragedy, along with the rest of state behavior, nurtured a Tigrayan collective sense of identity and it remains potent raw material for their nationalist mill. The account of the tragedy, as outlined by the Prime Minister above, will continue to be summoned up, nourishing the Tigrayan sense of identity.

Massacre of Civilians

We have been reproached for making no distinction between the innocent Armenians and the guilty; but that was utterly impossible, in view of the fact that those who were innocent today might be guilty tomorrow.

—Talaat Bey¹⁰⁶

There is no means of differentiating the bandits from the people.

—Mengistu Haile Mariam¹⁰⁷

The Armenians had a fair warning of what would happen to them in case they joined our enemies ... But if they ally themselves with our enemies, as they did in the Van district, they will have to be destroyed.

—Enver Pasha¹⁰⁸

Our forces are fighting not against the standard bandits, but against the people.

—Mengistu Haile Mariam¹⁰⁹

What characterized the war in Ethiopia was the violence against civilians as reprisals for the losses suffered by the military.¹¹⁰ In Eritrea, as early as 1970 a 10-km-wide strip of territory along the border with the Sudan was made a prohibited zone and a policy of using force was pursued.¹¹¹ Houses were raided and whole families shot and killed.¹¹²

Eritrean and Tigrayan civilians, political entrepreneurs, peasants and urban dwellers were all treated as integral members of the "other" group, the "enemy," the "bandits."¹¹³ Lamenting the loss of support in Tigray, Mengistu Hailemariam candidly said "the people of Shire [western Tigray] have allied themselves with the bandits."¹¹⁴ In another meeting, he reminded his listeners, "Have no doubt, let alone the people of Tigray, even the Tigrinya-speaking people of northern Gondar support [the TPLF] war."¹¹⁵ The *Dergue* conceded it had no support in Eritrea, too:

Except for the Kunama nationality, all Eritrean nationalities support the EPLF. They pretend to support the government only when the EPLF seems to be weakened ... They call the fighters "our children" ...

... One cannot dare say that the people in rural and urban areas genuinely believe in the unity of Ethiopia and genuinely support the government ...

... The people get cold and subdued when the government achieves victories and faces get brightened when the Front [EPLF] scores victories. One can read it on the faces of the people of Eritrea.¹¹⁶

Such frustrations shaped the *Dergue's* penchant for indiscriminate violence. A top secret telegram made to regional party leaders on the situation in Tigray reveals the attitude of the state:

The principal struggle, now, is between the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the people of Tigray - more or

less a civil war. The rest of the Ethiopian people will have to unite and deal with the people of Tigray.¹¹⁷

A State of Emergency was declared in the two "rebellious regions" when Mengistu ordered that there was no need to be governed by the laws of war: "Even though there are rules and orders, we must be cruel. For this we need a State of Emergency."¹¹⁸ And the message was candidly spelled out by the policy makers:

The reason for declaring a State of Emergency is to terrorize a people. To tell a people that "an absolute dictator has been appointed as your administrator."¹¹⁹

In the wake of the declaration of the State of Emergency, "Foreign aid workers have been asked to leave Tigray and Eritrea, for their own safety."¹²⁰ This was intended to conceal the state's mass violence from the outside world. Mengistu's direct call for "we must be cruel" set in motion an aura of ruthlessness. The year 1988 will be particularly remembered for the massacres of peasants in She'eb, northern Eritrea, — and Hauzien, north-eastern Tigray. In She'eb, four hundred persons — elderly, children, women, the disabled and the blind were killed in a horrifying attack. The EPLF's rhetorically framed description is factual:

There are few atrocities in the world which a sharp pen (that runs) non-stop and any number of piled words cannot describe. The inhuman deeds the *Dergue* forces committed in She'eb and its 12 surrounding villages on May 12 [1988] is one of them. No one can select words that correctly describe the sad and gross atrocity.

Thursday May 12, 8 o'clock people were busy with their daily lives as usual. Soldiers with 15 tanks encircled She'eb. Panicked people tried to run away, but they could not because it was completely surrounded by soldiers. Soldiers told the people to gather and listen to some speeches. They assembled under a big tree. Tanks began rolling toward the crowded assembly. Wonder-

ing what the tanks were going to do, the people froze. The crying of babies and children filled the air. While all this was going on, there was no humane reaction on the face of the human-like animals. It was a gruesome behavior. Tanks from four corners were rolling forward and backward grinding people into the ground. The chains of the tanks carrying the human flesh mixed with dust got wet with blood. People who tried to run away could not escape from the bullets of those who encircled the town and who were shooting non-stop. The noise, crying, and yelling gradually faded. One could only hear the noise of rolling tanks and the conversations and laughter of the soldiers who regard massacring civilians as their major victory.

That was not enough for the army. To make sure that no-one survived they kept on showering bullets on the piles of corpses. Finally, they raced for jewelry on the ears and noses of the dead women.¹²¹

She'eb was repeated in Tigray on June 22, the same year, but only on a bigger scale. In fact, the Hauzien Massacre stands out as the most notorious mass murder in Ethiopian history.¹²² Among the weapons used in Hauzien, were what survivors called "burning liquid," presumably napalm or phosphorous, and cluster bombs. The exact number of victims is hard to pinpoint, but it ranges from the TPLF's "more than 2,500" to *Africa Watch's* "1,800".¹²³

As in Hauzien, most of the major massacres during the war took place in market places, on market days. The regime found market places ideal because that was where people from many scattered villages congregated. At the end of each massacre, all villages had their share of victims, feeling the tremor of state terror. The bombardment of market places was also designed to dismantle the rural trade and exchange fabric, adversely affecting the economic viability of the rural setting.¹²⁴ For this reason, the army conducted operations on the ground particularly during the ploughing, harvesting, and weeding seasons forcing peasants off the land so that subsistence production could be disrupted.¹²⁵

Hunting Intellectuals and Businessmen

The greatest of spirits can be liquidated if its bearer is beaten to death with a rubber truncheon.

—Hitler¹²⁶

No sooner did the *Dergue* assume power than it started to use brute force. In 1975, it killed Meles Tekle, Giday Gebrewahid and Rezene Kidane. The trio were killed because they were Tigrayan intellectuals who opposed the regime. In the same year, the death squads dragged hundreds of youths from their homes in Asmara and strangled them in what they boastfully called the "Piano Wire Operation."¹²⁷ These actions heralded the 17-year-long reign of terror. Such atrocities were common after armed clashes subsided between the army and the insurgent forces.¹²⁸

In 1978, the "Red Terror" was launched in Tigray killing civilians that stood out in the society, behavior that the TPLF compared with that of Hitler and Mussolini.¹²⁹ In Eritrea, too, "piano wire" massacres resumed, claiming the lives of innocent people whose bodies littered the streets of Eritrean towns.¹³⁰ The arbitrary nature of the "Red Terror" was startling. It was simply designed to terrorize a people, notwithstanding their innocence. One innocent victim left this note as his death became imminent:

Due to much torture, I have falsely confessed that I am a member of the TPLF, hoping they would kill me so that the physical torture stops. If I die, I will see them [my killers] in the sky [God's place]. I am sorry for my family: my mother, my sister, my brothers. I feel sorry for my daughter, Amarech Haile-Selassie, who will have no one to look after her ... I hope my brothers will raise her. I am sorry to die without doing much for my wife, Woizero Berhana Teka. I will be killed for having committed no crime.¹³¹

The state made sure that the victims were a representative sample of the whole spectrum of the community. Randomly

picked, a businessman, recounts his near death ordeal in March 1978:

[The cadres] Biyadgign Asfaw and Dejen Tessema gathered all the businessmen of Adigrat in the Catholic Mission Hall ... Biyadgign called three names — my name, Hagos Bahta's and Tesfamichael Hadgu's — and told us to stand in one corner of the hall. Suddenly, a heated argument began between the two cadres as to whether the three of us had to die. Dejen argued there was not enough evidence against the two of us — myself and Hagos; and he won. We joined the rest of the businessmen while Tesfamichael Hadgu was taken out of the hall and shot right by the exit door. Then we were told to leave the hall watching the body of the victim ...¹³²

As the state's efforts to win the war were increasingly frustrated, Eritrean and Tigrayan intellectuals and professional elites were targeted. A *Dergue* member clumsily called for genocidal actions. "Perhaps we might have to consider what Nigeria did in the civil war," Haddis Tedla exhorted his colleagues:

Nigeria killed all [Ibo] officers. They deported all Ibos who were active in the economy... [And here, Eritreans and Tigrayans] are active in Addis Ababa and in the University. We might perhaps be better off to pick them and put them separately and take actions against them. But, can we do this? ... Obviously, we are a government and we cannot do this.¹³³

However, the *Dergue* failed to see that it was when the Ibo felt their survival was at stake, with the establishment of pogroms in the north, that they decided to secede from Nigeria.¹³⁴ Similarly, labelling Tigrayans in the professional and business community "internal patriots" and closely watching them was not helpful. Identified as such, Tigrayan elites all over the country suddenly became targets of abuse: "We must take measures against those who live in the central part of the country, who

benefit from it, but who do not give [us] moral and financial support."¹³⁵

The state's genocidal-like acts reached their extreme when it turned against its own Tigrayan stooges, such as Biyadgign Asfaw mentioned above— cadres who had been carrying out unspeakable atrocities. They too were arrested, tortured and/or killed allegedly for being members of the TPLF, the very organization with which they were mortal enemies. The top official to face this fate was Tadesse Gebreigziabher, a member of COPWE¹³⁶ and a confidant of Mengistu.¹³⁷ Preferring to record part of his account under two fictitious Tigrayan names, Hagos and Giday, rather than in the first person, Tadesse graphically described the danger that had befallen Tigrayans, merely for being Tigrayans, in a hand-written Amharinya manuscript. The voice of the tortured himself, just before it was permanently silenced, speaks for itself:

Hagos, a Tigrayan, is arrested. He could have a family; he could be a bachelor. He could be a government employee or a private businessmen. His work could be anywhere. He has no clue why he is arrested. He can not even guess why ...

He is a very careful and decent citizen. The first question he asks himself is why he is arrested. He goes over it in his mind. He looks back at his life and tries every now and then to find a reason for his arrest. For a while the reason for his arrest remains a mystery to him.

Hagos is arrested because he is suspected of being a TPLF member. Suspicion is enough to detain him. It is difficult to trace the source of the suspicion. No need for any evidence to prove Hagos guilty ...

... Hagos is taken to the Central Investigation Bureau. His hands are in chains. He is blindfolded and dumped in the corridor ...

Then interrogators come and tell him "We know you are a member of the TPLF. Now, tell us what your contributions were." Hagos gets the feeling of "all this is crazy." So he responds, "That can never be true! Not even in my dreams have I ever been a secessionist. I

have been at serious odds with this reactionary organization. I have fought ideological and armed struggle against this vile organization. I was wounded by the bullets of anti-revolutionaries. My wounds are not yet healed. The bullets are still in my body. Shall I show you? Whatever information you have about me is false!" Then he continues telling them how much he fought against the TPLF. He elaborates in detail the sacrifices he made for the revolution. Finally, he is told to shut up. Then the interrogators tell him he can open his mouth only when he decides to say he, indeed, is a member of the TPLF.

The interrogators give Hagos only half an hour to explain to them about his secessionist activities as a member of the TPLF. As he keeps on telling them that he is not a member of the TPLF, they become more and more angry. Communication is possible between the interrogators and Hagos only when he says "[Yes] I am a member of the TPLF." Hagos does not want to buy a new identity (particularly that of an organization he fought against and hated most) just to please his interrogators.

The time that is allocated for a round-table discussion is over. Gradually he goes to "interrogation" [torture]. They tell him "kneel down rotten Agame!" "Beating is the only language a Tigrayan understands!" Beating and torture continue; [he] collapses; [he] regains his consciousness; the "exercise" [in English] continues. Everything becomes a nightmare for Hagos. "What a terrible thing it is!"

Instead of dying during torture, Hagos ultimately decides to tell his interrogators what they want to hear - the fiction. Nothing could be worse than the torture. Now Hagos says "Let me talk". Hagos says he was a member of the TPLF.

Then he is ordered to give the names of Tigrayans, particularly those in COPWE, whom he recruited. He gives a name. Not enough. More. He feels totally sad. He is bringing innocent people to extreme forms of tor-

ture that are totally humanly unbearable. They will be tortured to death. He gets completely overwhelmed with feelings of guilt. As a result, he refuses to give more than one name. Then he is taken back to be tortured, the same old torture.

"If a government (a socialist one at that!) has no concern for fairness and justice, my struggle (that of an individual) cannot change things. Anyway, I have been arrested and am being tortured simply because, for some bad luck, I was born in a cursed land known as Tigray. This is my only crime. Other Tigrayans, too, are no different from me! I do not wish my bad luck to reach other Tigrayans. But my desire and wish are meaningless. Thus I have no means of saving other Tigrayans. At any price, I have to get out of this torture/pain. I do not care about others," Hagos finally reaches this kind of decision.

So Hagos again concedes and says "Let me talk" and torture stops. He gives a name. If the new name is that of a high-ranking official, the interrogators get pleased. If it is that of a businessman, the next question they ask is "Is he wealthy?" Hagos responds "Yes". Interrogators ask, "Very?". If the answer is "Yes", they get very pleased.

Hagos implicates friends and foes. It is even adequate if he mentions people whom he only knows by name. It does not matter whether he does not even know what they do; that, the interrogators will find out. There is no problem as long as Hagos is a Tigrayan and the people he implicates are Tigrayans. Now this sounds a joke or disinformation; but, it is neither. It is *bare fact!* [in English].

Hagos implicates Giday as a member of the TPLF ... Giday could be arrested the next day or in two years. The government is not worried about those who are implicated as TPLF members ... The fact that the whereabouts and behavior of those who are implicated is not of immediate concern to the interrogators demonstrates that all investigation is fake ...

The same old procedure is repeated on Giday. During torture, the interrogator sarcastically asks Giday whether he is thirsty. Innocent Giday (misses the sarcasm), thinking the interrogator is finally showing his humane side of love and sympathy, responds "Yes, I am thirsty." The interrogator goes nearer to his mouth and fills it with his own phlegm and orders him to swallow it. Beating makes sure the interrogator's order is respected ...

... During torture, blood-soaked clothes are put in his mouth so that he does not scream ... They tell Giday, "after all, we need only the land [Tigray], not the people ... Rotten Agame" ... All this torture because Giday happened to be a Tigrayan ...

... Human beings are human beings, not *guinea pigs* [in English]. *You find evidence, you do not fabricate it* [emphasis original].

What I have said is all true. It is only the names of Hagos and Giday that are fictitious. The pattern of interrogation is all the same.

The regime was not seeking truth for "Truth itself will not matter, just as it has never mattered to the interrogator working for quotas, since lies are the product of torture. There will be more arrests because there must be more arrests. The system feeds on this and it is never full."¹³⁸ During torture the interrogators were pushing Tadesse to implicate Fisseha Desta, the Tigrayan third-ranking *Dergue* member.¹³⁹ His vulnerability illustrates the pervasive nature of the state's genocidal-like behavior.

This strange behavior of arresting, torturing and/or killing the most trusted Tigrayan cadres, who operated the *Dergue's* machinery of oppression, reinforced the perception that the entire Tigrayan ethnîe was at risk. Actual physical insecurity made people to rally around the TPLF, the alternative organization that could possibly defend them from the *Dergue's* assault. As in Eritrea, in Tigray too, it was real or perceived fear of extinction that contributed to the rise of a sense of collective identity.

Notes

1. "Statement by the Chairman of the delegation of the Moslem League of Eritrea at the 49th meeting of the Ad Hoc Political Committee on 21, November 1950." A/C.38/L.46.
2. Wolde-ab, Press Conference, Beirut, 1971.
3. "The Eritrean Liberation Front: Political Program," Approved by the Second National Congress of the ELF. May 28, 1975, p. 31. Many Arabs and states alike had this false image of Eritrea, and after independence some appear to have been surprised by its non-Arab identity. "An Eritrean identity separate from its Arab dimension," writes an Arab commentator, "is far from being a historic fact. From the ancient days, Eritrea has maintained strong links with the Arabs." Abdul Qader Tash, "Why does [Eritrea's President] Afwerki Reject the Arabism of Eritrea?" *Arab News*. October 27, 1993.
4. Wolde-ab Woldemariam, "Tsela'ie Tselolo Qeba'ie," Part II. *Sagem*. February 1990, pp. 21 & 24.
5. Interview: Abraha Kahssai (36), TPLF Central Committee member, February 14, 1994. Addis Ababa.
6. Interview: Tewodros Hagos (40), EPRDF Central Committee member, February 16, 1994. Addis Ababa.
7. *Our Struggle and its Goals* (in English), Eritrean Peoples Liberation Forces, (n.d.)
8. *Vanguard*. April 1977. p. 15; see similar arguments of the ELF in *Democrasiyawii Heton Sewura Ertra'n*. 1979. pp. 14, 19-22.
9. Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.
10. President Mengistu Hailemariam, Minutes, 21st Regular Meeting of the WPE Polit. Bureau. May 21 1985 (*Genbot* 13 1977 Ethiopian Calendar) p. 28.
11. *Fitsamietat*. Editorial, October 21, 1978; *Merih*. November 1978. p. 26.
12. *Fitsamietat*. June 22 and July 5, 1978.
13. See Gerard Chaliand, *Revolution in the Third World*.
14. *Ertra'n Qalsan*. January 1987, p. 2.
15. *Dimtsi Hafash Ertra*. June 22 and August 19, 1989.
16. Interviews: e.g. Zemhret Yohannes; see also Bereket Habte

- Selassie, 1980. pp. 60-61; Araia Tseggai, 1981. p. 158, for unsubstantiated claim.
17. See for instance, Longrigg, 1945. pp. 166-67.
 18. See Chapter Three.
 19. *Ertra'n Qalsan*. pp. 3-5.
 20. Chaliand, *Revolution in the Third World*.
 21. *Vanguard*. June 1978. p. 25.
 22. *Merih*. June-July 1980, p. 39.
 23. *Fitsamietat*. July 1, 1984. p. 6.
 24. *Fitsamietat*. April 1, 1986. p. 3.
 25. *Political Report and National Democratic Program EPLF*. Adopted at the Second and Unity Congress of the EPLF and ELF (Central Leadership). March 19, 1987. pp. 94-95.
 26. *Vanguard*. June 1978. p. 34.
 27. *Sagem*. March 1988. p. 12.
 28. *Vanguard*. June 1978. p. 34; *Sagem*. August 1988. pp. 10-11.
 29. *Fitsamietat*. June 21, 1980. p. 2.
 30. See Yetegil Teri. January 1988. pp. 79-80; *Manifesto of the Tigray People's Liberation Front*. February 1976. p. V.
 31. *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray*. Thursday November 3 1983 (*Teqemti* 25 1975).
 32. "President Mengistu Hailemariam's Speech on May Day," *Addis Zemen*. May 1, 1989, pp. 5-6.
 33. "Ye Tsere Hezbotch Enqesa'qasie Be'semien Semien Ma'erab Etopia," Vol. I., September 1985 (*Meskerem* 1977). Report by Ministry of Security. pp. 200-203.
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139. The fact that Fisseha Desta, Mengistu's most faithful servant, was targeted, is collaborated by Dawit Wolde Giorgis who said that he was "paralyzed by fear" because he was often accused of being a member of the TPLF. See Dawit, 1989. p. 94.

VISIONS OF IDENTITY



Fifty years of Italian rule became a reason for the current political entrepreneurs to render Eritrea a distinct and more modern physiognomy. Although elites see the people of the Italian artifact of Eritrea as one distinct entity, that is not the way the people see themselves. This is demonstrated by a small survey that I conducted in Axum, Tigray, and in Mendefera, Eritrea.

Popular Perception of Identity

On the question of intermarriage, in my survey, for instance, all the twenty eight *Kebessa* (the Eritrean highlands) informants prefer to intermarry with their kinfolk south of the Mereb than with the Afar or the Kunama, fellow Eritreans: "Intermarriage with the Tigrayans has always been there. My relatives do not intermarry with the Afar or the Kunama, unless they are crazy!"¹ Another said: "It is clear. Two of my daughters are married to Tigrayans. Tigrayans are our brethren, part of our soul."² A *Jiberti* (*Kebessa* Muslim) pointed to an even stronger link between *Kebessa* and Tigray: "Many of us, the *Jiberti*, are originally from western Tigray — Wolkait, Shire, Axum, and Adua."³

Tigrayans from Axum, too, have an almost identical affinity with the *Kebessa* across the Mereb. Only three informants

out of twenty eight (10.7%) in my survey said they did not have any preference regarding intermarriage. Two gave religious justifications for their lack of preference. A Christian informant said: "You do not make any discrimination among human beings since we are all the children of Adam ... Yes, Seraye is nearer than others and there is also linguistic affinity ... But, really, religion is the most decisive element. Nothing else."⁴ And a Muslim informant reiterated the same theme: "Islam does not forbid intermarriage among Muslims. If I have a daughter and a Muslim asks for my daughter, under no circumstances could I say 'no.'"⁵ The overwhelming majority (89.5%), however, strongly preferred intermarrying with the Seraye to intermarrying with their fellow Ethiopians, the Amhara, or their fellow "Tigrayans," the Afar and the Kunama. Intermarriage with Seraye is normal and routine, said an octogenarian informant: "My life-long wife is from Tikul, Seraye ... My son is married to an Eritrean."⁶ Another octogenarian was even more sentimental: "Seraye are my cousins, always!"⁷ In fact, two informants stated that they did not see any distinction between Seraye, an area of the *Kebessa*, to the north of Axum and Agame, an area of Tigray to the south of Axum. Both Agame and Seraye are equidistant from Axum: "Seraye are our brethren, let me tell you. Whether it is Seraye or Agame, they are all Tigrayans."⁸ Another gave an almost identical answer: "Seraye are Tigrayans ... I regard Eritrea as my own homeland. Whether it is Seraye or Agame, it is my own country."⁹ A 75-year-old informant expressed the same sentiment:

My own grandmother is from Seraye—Adi Yeqni, Meraguz. Many of us in Axum have relatives in Seraye. From the ancient times we have had marriage links with them. I am here because it is my birth place and leaving your birth place is difficult. Otherwise, Seraye is as much my home as Axum. If I go there, I will meet my relatives ... I do not see Eritrea any differently from Tigray.¹⁰

Even when the Mereb became an international boundary, therefore, it was not a major geographical barrier. People intermingled freely. In the light of this, it is hardly an anomaly that

the "Father of Eritrea," Wolde-ab Woldemariam, who was born and raised in Seraye, was a Tigrayan by origin. Nor is it abnormal that the current leaders of Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki, and Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, have mothers from opposite sides of the Mereb.

For the public, who are anxious to continue "the chains of tradition,"¹¹ therefore, the religious and linguistic ties of ethno-history generate a potent trans-Mereb identity that makes intermarriage a routine practice. Such strong primordial ties were the basis for the trans-Mereb "Tigray-Tigrignie" *risorgimento* nationalism during the 1940s.

No Eritrean and Tigrayan non-elite informants, in my survey, regarded "Tigray-Tigrignie" as an abstract concept whose time has passed. They sketch out its map and speak about it matter-of-factly, as one elder said: "I take pride in it. All the people who live in the region from the Tekezze River speak the same language. It means the same people with the same fate."¹² For them, Eritrea and Tigray are integral parts of "Tigray-Tigrignie": "That was what they have been since the Axumite era."¹³

There appears to be, however, some sort of disjunction in this sense of common identity between the two halves of the Tigrayan ethnies that was caused by 62-years of separation. They see their past hardships differently. And hardships are important forgers of identity. For instance, the motto of the Quebecois, "*Je me souviens*" ("I remember"), is meant to echo their subjection to the English two hundred years ago. Similarly, while it is their subjection to the Europeans that the *Kebessa* remember, it is their subjection to the Amhara at the end of the 19th century that the Tigrayans remember. This difference is manifested in their perception of historical enemies.

Even after thirty years of devastating war against the Amhara-dominated state, *Kebessa* civilians today do not harbor the type of anti-Amhara bitterness Tigrayans do. This is primarily because the historicist virus has been a lot more potent in Tigray than in Eritrea because for a good part of the century Eritrea was not within Amhara-dominated Ethiopia. When asked whom they regard as historical enemies, Eritrean civilian informants (86%), in my survey, go all the way back to

Turkey, Egypt, Italy, Britain only finally mentioning Haile Selassie's and the *Dergue's* Ethiopia. Two (7.1%) said Arabs were their historical enemies. Two others (7.1%) said Menelik (1889-1913) was their historical enemy because he amputated the legs and hands of Eritrean (*ascaris*) captives of the vanquished Italian army during the battle of Adua in 1896. The anti-Amhara feelings of most *Kebessa* civilians are a lot milder than those of the Tigrayans.

The historical enemies of most of the Tigrayan informants (82.1%) start and end with the Amhara (Shoa). Two (7.1%) did not have any idea and only three (10.7%) included Turkey and Italy in the list of their historical enemies. Since current anxieties are based on wounds from the past, Tigrayans put their grievances in historical perspective and see a pattern: "We have had historical enmity with them. The Amhara will never rest until they completely subdue Tigrayans."¹⁴ Just as the Hutu see the Tutsi as inherently oppressive,¹⁵ so do the Tigrayans see the Amhara as inherently intriguers and manipulators. When asked who their historical enemies are, one elder bitterly answered:

Shoa! Shoa! Shoa! [They are] cruel, mean, satanic. Shoa! Give me a break! Non-believers in God. Mean ... They are cruel. Cruel! Cruel! Cruel! ... When I was in Gore [south-western Ethiopia] in the 1970s, for instance, I knew a Shoan Amhara ... From the moment he came to know that I was a Tigrayan, he completely stopped talking to me. They go three steps backward when they know you are a Tigrayan and act as if they do not know you. Cruelty? Shoan cruelty, my goodness, you cannot imagine!¹⁶

A Muslim elder linked the past with the present in an emotive way: "Menelik and Haile Selassie, not to speak of the *Dergue*, are our historical enemies. They were intriguers." Then he tearfully continued to talk about the "Red Terror" of the *Dergue* era, counting the bodies that littered the streets of Axum. He continued to name the victims who had died seventeen years ago, affectionately referring to them as "my children."¹⁷

What is interesting here is that neither the Italians nor the Turks, Egyptians or Mahdists are mentioned as historical enemies by the majority of the informants. It is the Amhara (Shoa) who come to the minds of Tigrayans when they think of their enemies in history: "Amhara! ... Always Amhara! The Shoans always intrigue against us. They always want to hurt us. Their chauvinism has put us where we are today. Let God help us be more patient and tolerant than they are."¹⁸ Such statements are clear references to "atavistic hatreds" and "ancestral enmities"¹⁹ and show the strength of primordial ties.

The potency of the atavistic hatreds and ancestral enmities was shown by answers given to the question of whether respondents feared being treated by Amhara doctors. Whilst all except two (7.1%) of the Eritreans said they would not be afraid to see Amhara doctors, two thirds (64.3%) of the Tigrayan civilians categorically said they would not trust Amhara doctors. What a 74-year-old informant said represents the feelings of almost all the *Kebessa* informants that "Doctors all over the world make oaths; and I expect Amhara doctors to have professional ethics."²⁰ But the majority of the Tigrayans, on the other hand, such as one 85-year-old informant would not trust Amhara doctors:

Oh no! I would not trust them ... I have heard that the Amhara doctors have eliminated many educated Tigrayans. I prefer to be treated by a white doctor ... The Amhara are really mean-spirited. They do not have guts but when it comes to evil deeds, they are good at them ... Let God punish them for their atrocities.²¹

State atrocities during the war gave the Tigrayan people the perception that every Amhara was an accomplice and doctors, as long as they were Amhara, were not to be trusted. There was the perception that any Tigrayan who got admitted to hospital would never come out alive:

I can never trust Amhara doctors! Never! I would not let an Amhara doctor operate on me. During the *Dergue* era, they were deliberately killing patients. It was one

way of fighting a war against Tigrayans. They used to claim that it was the incompetent Russian doctors who were killing patients. In actual facts, it was the Amhara doctors who were carrying out the killings and blame it on the Russians.²²

The *Kebessa* and Tigrayan informants gave diametrically opposite answers because it was Tigray that experienced more atrocities than Eritrea, particularly after the mid-1980s when the *Dergue* pursued its policy of starving and deporting Tigrayans.

Historically, the people from both sides of the Mereb have more or less the same heroes. In my survey, people on either side of the Mereb unanimously exalt Yohannes IV (1872-1889) and *Ra'esi* Alula as great leaders. Muslim informants had some reservation as to Emperor Yohannes's religious policy. A *Jiberti* said: "Yohannes's only mistake was his religious fanaticism. *Kebessa* Christians had no reason to dislike him."²³ This was backed by a Muslim from south of the Mereb:

I like him, although he made some mistakes during his reign—forcefully converting Muslims to Christianity. My grandfather, Bayan, was baptized by the Emperor and given a Christian name of Mengesha. My father, Nurhussein, was Christianized and given the name Gebremariam. But, finally he proclaimed that all could return to their faith ... We cannot dismiss him as a bad person on the basis of mistakes he made for a period of 3-6 months.²⁴

With a sense of trans-Mereb identity, a *Kebessa* Christian said: "Yohannes was a hero. But he had major weaknesses. He was outmaneuvered by Menelik and made to go to war against the Mahdists. It was also the intrigues of the Shoan Menelik that made the Emperor dislike Alula when he was told that Alula had his eyes on the Crown ... *If Yohannes had not shown such weaknesses we would not have been where we are.*"²⁵

In my survey, the Emperor's lieutenant *Ra'esi* Alula, reputed for military genius and just rule, is also unanimously looked upon as a hero among the trans-Mereb people. Since

his military talents were proven in the region north of the Mereb, Eritreans remember and admire those qualities very well. Yet, his military genius, surprisingly, is remembered only *second* to his sense of justice and fairness. In *Kebessa*, Alula is *primarily* remembered for his just and fair administration, and for restoring peace and order in the region. From his new capital, Asmara, "he kept the peace of his province and enforced justice. The territory breathed again after the long nightmare of civil war and the bloodthirsty reign of [Woldemichael]." ²⁶

What I found in my survey about Alula basically verifies what the British Political Officer, Trevaskis, learned in the 1940s, that Alula's reign was *Kebessa's* "golden age":

The days of Ras Alula's governorship are not yet sufficiently remote for the older generation living in the Hamasien to have forgotten them ... One and all confirm that Ras Alula was a just ruler, well loved by the people, and that at no time in its history has the Hamasien been so tranquil or free from the interminable disputes which are today the characteristic features of its daily life. ²⁷

Half-a-century after Trevaskis made the above observation, in my survey too, "one and all" of the *Kebessa* informants in 1994 remember what may be termed *Pax Alula* and regard him as a judicious ruler of the *Kebessa*. They fondly recited the folk epic:

Saintdom like that of Lalibela²⁸
Longevity like that of Methuselah
Justice like that of Alula

Kebessa civilians cannot speak about Alula without mentioning *Ra'esi* Woldemichael Solomon ("Gomida"), the *Kebessa* chief who had intermittent differences with the feudalists south of the Mareb. He was ultimately tricked by Alula into submission and lived in forced retirement in Axum. In my survey, people in Axum, remember him in retirement, leading a peaceful life in Axum where he died. They call him neither a hero nor a villain but a person who lived peacefully among them.

In the *Kebessa*, however, most of the twenty eight non-elite informants (93%) said Woldemichael was a hero. Yet, whereas all of them could explain why they regard Alula as a hero, none could give reasons why Woldemichael deserves a heroic status. Only two of the informants (7.1%), one explicitly and another implicitly, said Woldemichael was not really a hero. A 94-year-old informant said "Woldemichael was like a *shifta* [bandit]." ²⁹ The only reason another could find to call him a hero was that "he fought at the battle of Gundet against the Egyptians as Yohannes's lieutenant." ³⁰ Otherwise, by citing a popular maxim, he implicitly suggested he was not a hero. If at all Woldemichael is loved in the *Kebessa*, he said, it must only be for the simple reason that he was from there:

Entekone entekone ne'ana,
Entezeye'le ne'ahatena,
Entezeye'le ne'deqi hawebotatena,
Entezeye'le ne'gorobabetena,
Entezeye'le de'ma ne'deqi a'dena.

[Power] should belong to us,
 If not [to us, then] to our brothers,
 If not [to our brothers, then] to our cousins,
 If not [to our cousins, then] to our neighbors,
 And if not [to our neighbors, then] to our countrymen.

Unable to elaborate why he called him a hero, Captain Gebregiorgis Gebreizgi recited the following folk poem which hardly reflects Woldemichael's heroism:

Gomida, Gomida
Golgol Semhar geberkayo mayda
Golgol Halhal geberkayo mayda
Golgol Semhar enkeloka gefih meriet
Golgol Halhal enkeloka gafih meriet
Entay a'etewaka nab senselet?
Grazmatch do iluka 'aymewatin'?
Qegnazmatch do iluka 'aymewatin'?

Senadirka zebelkayo betin
Ketrekib ketesa'en zeytefetin?

"Gomida, Gomida,
 You mastered the plains of Semhar,
 You mastered the plains of Halhal,
 When you had the plains of Semhar, a huge landmass,
 When you had the plains of Halhal, a huge landmass,
 What made you bound with shackles?
 Did a *Grazmatch* tell you: 'I will not die'?
 Did a *Qegnazmatch* tell you: 'I will not die'?
 That you unfastened your ammunition belt,
 Win or lose, why didn't you try?"

Another *Kebessa* chief who had intermittent differences with the feudalists south of the Mereb was *Degiat* Bahta Hagos of Akele Guzai. When the Italian colonialists arrived in Massawa, he was one of the principal collaborators who facilitated their advance to the highlands. Finally, he rebelled in 1894 against the Italians and was killed. The majority of the Seraye informants in my survey (82.1%) do not have enough knowledge to call Bahta a hero. Three (10.7%) called him a hero but two (7.1%) did not regard him as a hero. According to one, Bahta cannot be called a hero because he "vacillated a lot for personal reasons."³¹ Another was dismayed with the whole project of inventing heroes,

It is amazing! As time passes every Eritrean is becoming a nationalist hero. Bahta is one of them. He even went down to Massawa to welcome the Italian colonialists and guided them all the way to the *Kebessa*. He identified with them so much so he was converted to their religion, Catholicism. Finally, he rebelled against them only when administrative differences surfaced. He is not a hero!³²

Most informants in Seraye said that since Bahta was from Akele Guzai, they did not know much about him. They made it look as if Seraye and Akele Guzai, two adjacent districts of the

Kebessa, were worlds apart. This is reminiscent of mid 19th century France where, "Every valley is still a little world that differs from the neighboring world as Mercury does from Uranus. Every village is a clan, a sort of state with its own patriotism."³³

Further, people of the *Kebessa* were asked what they would do if a war broke out between the TPLF and the Amhara. All, except one (3.6%), would support the Tigrayans for purely primordial reasons - common heritage and traditions. One referred to the Amhara as "'Tigray Tigrignie's' common enemy."³⁴

Expressing commitment to help Tigrayans, another said "They are our brethren and we owe them favors."³⁵ "Eritreans and Tigrayans are comrades-in-arms," said another. "They need to support each other. Eritrea's pride is because of Tigray; Tigray's pride is because of Eritrea."³⁶ In apparent reference to Mengistu's speech on Tigray when he called it a poverty-stricken useless region, another *Kebessa* informant went as far as equating it with the "fatherland" (*Adi Abo*) of all Eritreans:

Eritrea must support the Tigrayans out of brotherhood. No Eritrean wants to learn the denigration of Tigrayans. When the Amhara devalued Tigray by calling it a poor and famine-stricken region that was of no value to Ethiopia, tell me which Eritrean was not hurt? The people of Seraye were sickened when Tigray was denigrated by the Amhara mass media! Which Eritrean will tolerate his *Adi Abo* humiliated?³⁷

Yet, most people in my survey did not conceptualize *Adi Abo* in the nationalist sense. Four Tigrayan respondents (14.3%) had no idea about the term. For four others (14.3%) *Adi Abo* meant communal norms as in marriage, divorce, feud, etc. Seven (25%) equated it with Tigray and for eleven (39.3%) of them it meant the parish or village where they and/or their fathers were born.

Among the *Kebessa* informants, too, six (21.4%) said Eritrea was their *Adi Abo*. For seven (25%) of them it meant communal norms. The majority, fifteen (53.6%) of them, equated it with the village or locality where they and/or their fathers were born. The overall response conforms with what the former leader of

Senegal, Leopold Senghor, once said: "In Africa, the Fatherland (*patrie*) is the *Sere* country, the *Malinke* country, the *Sonhrai*, the *Mossi*, the *Baule*, the *Fon* country ..." ³⁸

Yet, wars, migrations and religious pilgrimages help peasants know other communities. In the process, they develop some degree of identification with those whom they share the "givens" of language, religion, etc., ³⁹ which determine the emotional and psychological dimension of ethnicity. ⁴⁰ Consequently, for the trans-Mereb civilians, unlike for the political actors, primordial affinity, not rational cost-benefit calculations, would be the driving force for mutual attraction.

Elite Perception of Identity

Political elites perceive their identity differently. The Tigrayan elites, for instance, tolerate intermarriages with the world outside of their region. Almost half of the twenty eight informants (46.4%) gave answers similar to those of the civilian informants — preferring intermarriages with the *Kebessa* to the Amhara, fellow Ethiopians, or the Kunama and Afar, fellow "Tigrayans." An almost equal number of informants (42.9%) said they had no preference whatsoever. Only three (10.7) said they would prefer intermarriage with their fellow citizens, the Amhara, to the *Kebessa* "foreigners."

For Tigrayan elites, intermarriage with the *Kebessa* is normal and bears no social stigma because of the primordial ties. One was categorical: "I have never taken the *Kebessa* and Tigrayans as people with different identities." ⁴¹ Some feel the contradiction in preferring intermarriage with the *Kebessa* to the Amhara. With the former they share primordial ties but not citizenship and with the latter they share citizenship but not primordial ties except for religion. One high-ranking TPLF informant who would prefer to intermarry with the *Kebessa* than with his fellow Tigrayan Afars and Kunama was uneasy when asked whether he would also prefer the *Kebessa* to the Amhara: "Just leave it. I will pass over this question. It is not helpful." ⁴² Mohammed Yonus avoided the contradiction by downplaying the importance of primordial ties: "It is their [my relatives] choice. I have no interest in spreading Tigrayan-ness. My uncle

is married to an Amhara. Their children speak both Tigrinya and Amarinya and there is no problem."⁴³

The Eritrean political actors, on the other hand, do not share the self-perceptions of the trans-Mereb civilians. Nor do they tolerate intermarriage with the world outside of their homeland as their Tigrayan counterparts do. Two thirds of the twenty eight informants (64.3%) prefer all intermarriages to take place among Eritreans alone, regardless of ethnicity and religion. Intermarriage with Tigrayans became a distant second choice, and only if people really had to look outside of Eritrea. Intermarriage with the Amhara was unthinkable. One stressed this:

It is difficult for me to forget what the Amhara did to my people. When I heard my older sister in Ethiopia was dating an Amhara while I was fighting in the field, I sent her a message through my other sister in Germany expressing my disapproval. It was okay to date a Tigrayan, a German, an American or whoever else, but not an Amhara!⁴⁴

The remaining one third (35.7%) of the Eritrean elite informants said either they would have to be faced with the situation or they had no preference whatsoever concerning marriage. Yet when discussing their personal Tigrayan links, they were not comfortable. One turned the tape recorder off to say how close he came to marrying a Tigrayan who finally left him. The fact that one of the most enlightened political cadres (with a postgraduate degree) could only share this trivial information with someone "off the record" shows to what extent elite social convention forbids marital links with Tigrayans. The degree of social group disapproval was shown when another answered the question of how he would feel if members of his immediate family intermarried with Tigrayans. After being defensive, he justified his lack of preference by raising his voice and two hands simultaneously in a language uncharacteristically strong:

My sister is married to a Tigrayan, my brother to a Swede. I do not have any problem. I am not giving you answers that are generally regarded acceptable. No! I

am being honest! I cannot be a husband to my sister. She chooses her spouse herself. As long as she is happy, that is fine with me.⁴⁵

Regardless of where the informant stands on the marital link, the language he used can only show the degree of uneasiness generated by the social stigma among Eritrean elites towards intermarriage with Tigrayans. Similarly, in contrast to how ordinary people feel, having descent from Tigray is unmentionable among the elites. One who admitted that his mother was a Tigrayan hastened to add "Yet, I would rather intermarry with the Afar and Kunama than with Tigrayans because during the armed struggle the barriers between the *Kebessa*, on the one hand, and the Afar and Kunama, on the other, were broken."⁴⁶ It is such an elite social parochialism that prevented the publicity of whatever Tigrayan parentage President Isaias Afwerki has. In fact, opponents have used "the major part of his parentage" which is "of Tigrayan extraction"⁴⁷ as a political liability.

On the notion of "Tigray-Tigrignie," which is a primordial-based philosophy of bringing all the Tigrinya-speakers under the same political roof, too, ordinary people and elites stand poles apart. Today, the "Tigray-Tigrignie" *risorgimento* nationalism whose slogan in the 1940s used to be "Eritrea for Eritreans" is anathema to all of the current Eritrean political elites. They dismiss it as merely instinctive: "It is an emotional thing - *istinto*."⁴⁸ This is the most forthright disavowal of the instinctual and sentimental nature of nationalism by political activists. It is precisely the instinctual and psychological basis of nationalism that makes people seek a political roof, not infrequently contrary to economic exigencies. The desire to "go it alone" in Quebec, for instance, is directed not by the mind but by the heart of the Quebecois. Except for instinctual and psychological reasons, Quebec is better off in Canada. The "*Je me souviens*" motto summons grievances that took place two hundred years ago when the English defeated the French. That there is more than rational interests into nationhood was also observed over a century ago: "*Il y a dans la nationalité un côté de sentiment; elle est âme et corps tout à la fois.*"⁴⁹

For the TPLF informants, too, the whole concept of "Tigray-Tigrignie" is a "folk tale,"⁵⁰ not even instinctual: "It has no emotional appeal to our generation. In the past, the two regions had a psychological bondage. It has no romantic expression in our life. During the armed struggle, both Eritrea and Tigray have replaced it with divergent nationalisms."⁵¹ However, this position of elites that "Eritrea is Eritrea and Tigray is Tigray"⁵² is not shared by ordinary people, as shown earlier.

On the question of historical enemies, Tigrayan and Eritrean leaders did not only give answers that diverge from those of the people but from those of each other as well. Tigrayan political elites saw enmity from the class perspective while the Eritreans consistently entertained their nationalist perspective, reflecting divergent political goals. Most answers from the Tigrayans used language such as "feudalism," "reactionary forces," "ruling classes," etc. Half (50%) of them focussed on "Amhara ruling classes" as their historical enemies while the other half (50%) included the "Tigrayan ruling classes" along with the Amhara ruling classes as their historical enemies.

Eritrean elites gave diverse answers. Four of them (14.3%) could not answer the question. Two of them (7.1%) said Menelik who amputated the hands and legs of Eritrean captives during the battle of Adua was their historical enemy. Ten (35.7%) started with the Turks and ended up with the *Dergue*, including the Tigrayan feudalists, as their historical enemies. Twelve (42.9%) of them said their historical enemies were Haile Selassie and the *Dergue*.

Asked whether they would be frightened of being treated by Amhara doctors, half of the EPLF informants (53.6%) said they would not have any fear of being treated by an Amhara doctor. One, "A.B.", qualified his answer by adding "unless the doctor knows I am a combatant." A little less than half of them (46.4%), however, said they would not trust an Amhara doctor. One of them said: "Of course, I would be suspicious of an Amhara doctor. It is the Amhara, particularly the educated, who have lost their mind."⁵³

Half of the TPLF interviewees (50%) said they would be suspicious of Amhara doctors. However, their number must

exceed 50% because as one said: "I say I have no fears of being seen by an Amhara doctor; but in actual fact we go to Military hospitals whose doctors are well screened."⁵⁴ In that case, the gap between the two thirds of the informants from the general public and half of Tigrayan elite informants who would be suspicious of Amhara doctors must be narrower. As pointed out earlier, the response of the *Kebessa* people that they do not fear being seen by Amhara doctors would have to be explained by the fact that the state did not commit in the *Kebessa* the kind of multi-faceted mass violence it did in Tigray. Old wounds in Tigray are recalled more easily than in Eritrea, which was not under the Amhara rule for most of the century.

Political elites also read their past differently. Unlike the ordinary people, two thirds of the EPLF informants (64.3%) regard Emperor Yohannes and Alula as foreigners and conquerors. Four (14.3%) admitted that the Eritrean revolution misrepresented Yohannes and Alula as "a means of inciting the people." And the Minister of Information and Culture and two others (10.7%) very defensively said they did not know anything about history. They struggled to evade the question. One angrily responded: "I cannot make a judgement on Emperor Yohannes. We concentrated more on the military aspect of the revolution ... There were numerous emperors in the past and I do not even know why you are so concerned about Yohannes."⁵⁵ The other said: "I have reservations about history. I do not know which is fact and which is fiction. I leave it to historians ... History has no place in my mind."⁵⁶ Two *Metahit* Muslims (7.1%), however, firmly stated that the history of the last thirty years was good enough for them and they did not need to go beyond that.

Although there is consensus on Alula's military genius among Tigrayan people and cadres, *Kebessa* people, foreign writers and adversaries, Eritrean political elites outrightly reject even his most obvious qualities:

I cannot call Alula even a military hero. The wars we are told he fought were actually fought by Eritreans. Tell me where Alula fought? He is just the creation of Ethiopian history writers.⁵⁷

And the Catholic priest-researcher-combatant, *Abba Yisaaq*, says:

I hate him from the hair on his head all the way down to his toenail ... He was crooked, an intriguer and, definitely, not a hero ... How can one forget the atrocities committed by Alula? When the Italians came in 1889, many regions of the *Kebessa* were totally abandoned—wiped out by Alula's wars against the Eritrean people.⁵⁸

On the other hand, the majority of Eritrean elites (71.4%) presented *Ra'esi* Woldemichael Solomon, the *Kebessa* chief adversary of Alula, as a hero and an "Eritrean national liberation fighter."⁵⁹ They say what made him a hero were the intermittent differences he had with the Tigrayan feudalists.

As in the case of Woldemichael, Bahta Hagos was considered a hero by most (71.4%) of the elite informants. But, after all is said and victory is achieved, more political elites tend to read history objectively and there is much less interest in the pre-colonial history, as Ahmed Tahir Baduri, the Eritrean Vice Minister of Information and Culture stated:

Nationalism, for me, starts with colonialism. If there is any history that is spoken of among the *Metahit*, it is spoken in terms of religion, that Christians from the *Kebessa* were raiding Semhar. You do not hear much distinction being made between Alula and Woldemichael. They do not speak in terms of a nation and nationalism ... Take Bahta Hagos, for instance, whom did he mobilize to lead a resistance? A small region and a few people ... I think we should speak about the current nationalism and put less emphasis on the past. I can talk about people like Wolde-ab Woldemariam.

Indeed, the only hero whose credibility is unanimous among civilians and elites is Wolde-ab. To one of the elites, Wolde-ab (who was alive when the survey was conducted) was "A patriot, unequalled! When I see him my body trembles out of

admiration."⁶⁰ And to a civilian, he was "Above human beings and below God."⁶¹

To test the strength of the primordial ties that bind the TPLF with the EPLF, a soccer match between Eritrean and Shoan teams was imagined. In the past every Tigrayan used to cheer the Eritrean team. When asked whether they would still do that, all the TPLF informants were defensive and almost all evaded the question by saying either they would support whoever played better or they do not go to games. Only four (14.3) of the informants said they would support the Shoan team because Shoa is Ethiopian and today there is a "democratic and fair system" in Ethiopia. The legendary combatant, Mohammed Yonus ("Samora") said:

I would support the Shoan team over the Eritrean because I am an Ethiopian. In the past, I used to support the Eritrean team. Now, I am changed. In the past, emotions dictated me; now I am led by reason.

Others, however, were not as "rational" as "Samora". This was the second question Bitew Belai refused to answer. His reticence on this question and on an earlier one regarding intermarriage, however, spoke louder than verbally-articulated answers. His silence and that of others show the potency of primordial ties even now among Tigrayan rational actors.

For the EPLF, this hypothetical question was rephrased as whom they would support in case of a war between the TPLF and the Amhara, the same question that was asked to informants from the Eritrean public. Most of the elites (85.7%) said they would help the TPLF, three (10.7%) said they would not help the TPLF and one answered: "I do not respond to 'if' questions."⁶² The Minister of Information and Culture said "There is no way we will intervene in the internal affairs of Ethiopia." Although a majority of the elites said it was in their self-interest to stand by the TPLF, only two gave primordial justifications. One said, "We will go to Alewaha and defend the TPLF. Should there be any more wars, they would have to be fought beyond Alewaha."⁶³ Another responded:

We must support the TPLF. The Amhara establishment must never resurrect. There should never be another Amhara regime. They were given a chance not for five or ten years, but for 100 years. All they did was to transform Ethiopia into an Amhara community. They believe Amhara means Ethiopia.⁶⁴

Yet, despite the harmony, none of the political elites presented "Tigray-Tigrignie" as their "fatherland" (*Adi Abo*). For one EPLF cadre, *Adi Abo* had no meaning. For some (26.5%) of them it had either a literal meaning where their fathers were born and died or their own birthplace. For the majority (71.4%), though, it meant Eritrea. One of them conceded that the identification of Eritrea with *Adi Abo* is a recent and an ongoing process:

We believe we have a national responsibility to build the Eritrean national identity. We say we have contributed something to its development, but it is not yet completed...

... When I was in command of a battalion during the armed struggle, a certain Mahmoud Osman from a village in Semhar used to be our guide while we were undertaking sabotage activities in Massawa ... Recently, he came from Saudi Arabia where he currently lives ... It was with much regret that he learned I was married and told me 'I was going to have you marry my daughter' ... The fact that a Tigre-speaking *Metahit* Muslim seriously pondered a marriage link with a Tigrinya-speaking *Kebessa* Christian is interesting, in and of itself, ...

Therefore, anyone who was in the struggle is my brother; ... If my blood brother was not in the struggle, he is not my brother. It is Mahmoud Osman who is my brother. And for both of us, when we speak about *Adi Abo*, it is Eritrea that comes to our minds.⁶⁵

Among Tigrayan elites only one (3.6%) said Ethiopia is his *Adi Abo*. Another said it is his hometown that he regards as his *Adi Abo*. Eight (28.6%) said the whole notion of "fatherland" was

senseless. One of them justified: "Personally, I happen to love my mother more than my father."⁶⁶ The majority (64.3%), however, identified *Adi Abo* with Tigray. Sebhat Negga who was the TPLF's Chairman for many years, after pausing and hesitating, said it was Tigray that comes to his mind. The vice-governor of Tigray, however, answered instantly and categorically:

My *Adi Abo* is Tigray. That is how I become an Ethiopian. Otherwise, I cannot be an Ethiopian in the vacuum; just like I have to be an Ethiopian in order to be an African. Outside of Tigray, *Adi Abo* makes no sense to me.⁶⁷

One would expect the nationalists to give a uniform answer on the concept of "fatherland" which is central to national identity. Yet, no uniform answer was given by the cadres themselves who were the ethno-regional missionaries, responsible for politicizing the populace. The fact that only a few of the public informants, who were urban dwellers, identified "fatherland" with either Eritrea or Tigray, after a long and bitter nationalist struggle and ultimate victory, too, is interesting. If the informants were peasants who did not go through the destructive wars, the lack of familiarity with *Adi Abo* would be expected. In 1870, for instance, when France lost Alsace-Lorraine to Germany, peasants did not see why they had to die for Alsace-Lorraine which seemed alien to them. They did not even know what *France* meant. And *la patrie*, was a "fine word ... that thrills everyone except the peasant."⁶⁸ More than a century later, and after many years of nationalist wars in Eritrea and Tigray, *Adi Abo* (*la patrie*) is a fine word that thrills no one except the political entrepreneurs, and not all of them, for that matter.

It is hard to speak about the existence of national consciousness unless it is entertained by the popular masses.⁶⁹ That it has remained sheer musings of the elites in Eritrea and Tigray indicates its undeveloped nature. To claim that the Eritrean and Tigrayan rural masses have a national consciousness is tantamount to saying that the socio-economic forces that transformed "peasants to Frenchmen" and "print-capitalism" that is *sine qua non* for "imagining communities" exist in Eritrea and Tigray. Neither do.

Consequently, the explanation for the success of the EPLF and the TPLF against the largest and best-equipped army in black Africa would have to be sought outside the potency of their ethno-regional nationalist ideology. The invention of history and the selective summoning of the past had limited impact in remapping popular consciousness. A response given by a *Kebessa* informant is indicative of the nature of the Eritrean national identity. Asked what *Adi Abo* meant to him, he instantly and firmly answered:

Eritrea! Eritrea is my *Adi Abo*. Two of my children fought and died for the sake of this Eritrea! I have no other country, no other *Adi Abo* but Eritrea!⁷⁰

Nothing tells more than this response that the Eritrean national identity is recent which can hardly trace its existence into the remote past. The whole project of elites to invent heroes and disfigure the past had no impact in remapping the civilian sense of identity. At most, the Eritrean collective identity can go back to the armed struggle and the high price the people paid for it. For the man quoted above, "fatherland" (*la patrie*) is not the land of his forefathers. He did not have to hark back into the "golden" past of milk and honey and the pristine past of "greatness." Far from being the land of ancestors, "fatherland" is the land of his children, his two sons, who gave their lives for its sake. Thus, the mythical quality attached to a territory which is vital to a group sense of identity would, therefore, have to emanate not from an Eritrea of the heroic forefathers but an Eritrea of the heroic offsprings. And a pan-Eritrean distinct identity can only look towards the future, not the past.

This argument could be corroborated by a response given to a different question. When asked how they felt when the TPLF-led coalition forces dislodged the *Dergue* and took the seat of power in Addis Ababa, all civilians responded they were relieved the war ended and they had peace. Peace was what they yearned for, not political independence, flag, national anthem, etc. which would have shown a developed sense of national identity.

The absence of a strong peasant national consciousness was also insinuated by elites themselves. Asked how they managed to mobilize the parochial peasantry, they said the enemy, the *Dergue*, did most of the work for them. Its mass violence forced peasants to rally around the political elites.

Eritrea's Unmarked Boundary

The gap between *Kebessa* civilian identity and that of the rational actors observed in the survey above is, however, a more recent development. It is mainly after the 1960s that elites have tried to draw a boundary with Tigray. And it has been so pervasive that even the "Father of Eritrea," Wolde-ab, who had never shied away from talking about his Tigrayan parentage, was silent about it after the 1960s.

In the 1940s, Wolde-ab's Tigrayan-ness was used against him by his arch rival, the Unionist Tedla Bairu, who tried to take him out of the Eritrean society by accusing him of being a Tigrayan who had no rights in Eritrean political affairs. Wolde-ab defended himself in his article titled "Who, then, could have the right to speak about Eritrea[?]" saying, "Since a Tigrayan is a descendent of kings, princes and aristocrats who is not double-tongued and who does not betray his friend, I am immensely pleased and honored by Mr. Tedla's big insult that I am a Tigrayan." After stressing "a Tigrayan is a revered name," he continued:

People in Europe, Asia, America and Oceania are talking about Eritrea ... Even the *Tikurir* [black Sudanese] are talking and writing on the emancipation of Eritrea. According to the politics of Mr. Tedla, though, a Tigrayan cannot express his ideas on the fate of Eritrea. It is a truly amazing political judgement! In addition to the ancient past, Mr. Tedla Bairu has also forgotten the most recent history that was written with the blood of [Emperor] Yohannes *Walde-Negodguad* ["the son of thunderstorm"] and [*Ra'esi* Alula] *Abba Negga*; and he is now saying Tigrayans should never express their views on the fate of Eritrea ...

... Such judgement that betrays the oneness of Eritrea and Tigray is not expected even from someone who cannot trace his Eritrean origins for more than fifty years, let alone from the lips of Mr. Tedla Bairu.⁷¹

Yet, it is only paradoxical that the "Tigrayan" Wolde-ab had to become more Eritrean than the Eritrean Tedla Bairu. The latter tried to transform the former's Tigrayan origin into a political liability in order to give Eritrea to the Amhara-dominated Ethiopia. Perhaps this attempt to marginalize and alienate Wolde-ab (a Tigrayan) from the Eritrean society might have pushed him to his uncompromising nationalist stand. Possibly, it is similar feelings of not fully belonging to their respective societies that pushed Malcom X (of Grenadan and white ancestry), Ataturk (Anatolian), Napoleon (Corsican) and Marcus Garvey (Jamaican) to ultra nationalism: "They manifest in their own personalities some resolution of previously disturbing slates."⁷²

For the older generation, trans-Mereb is an entity. A 1940s' *Kebessa* elite, for instance, cited the routine intermarriage, which is a crucial marker of collective identity,⁷³ to illustrate the bondage between the two halves of the Tigrayan ethnies. "We have always intermarried with the Tigrayans," the former member of the "Imperial Federal Council," exhorted the EPLF to work closely with the TPLF. "If you go to the field," he echoed Wolde-ab's 1946 statement that almost every Eritrean has Tigrayan ancestry, "you will not find one combatant who is purely Eritrean on both lines of his parentage."⁷⁴ Such elites espoused the "Tigray-Tigrignie" *risorgimento* ideology which undermined the Mereb as an international boundary.

The 1940s political elites revered Yohannes and Alula.⁷⁵ And apparently it was in appreciation of Yohannes's famous general and most judicious governor that Wold-ab, for instance, named his third child and first son "Alula," a name with a trans-Mereb nationalist meaning. This kind of nationalism is linked with the rise of an enlightened middle class in a market economy.⁷⁶ For the nascent and miniscule Eritrean middle class of the 1940s, therefore, "Tigray-Tigrignie" was an ideal model

of a would-be nation, expected to host mainly a people with one language and one culture who share common historical experiences.⁷⁷

Consequently, the prevailing primordial sense of identity brought Tigray and Eritrea closer during the political crisis and communal insecurity that characterized post-colonial Eritrea and Tigray. And in times of crisis, primordial attachments tend to be stronger.⁷⁸ However, having departed Ethiopia in 1890 and being unfamiliar with the Amhara political machinations, many Eritreans in the 1940s and 1950s, except for the *Kebessa* anti-Unionists, did not fully share "Tigray's perennial disaffection". It was for this reason that Tigrayan elites were devastated by the termination of the Ethio-Eritrean "federation" in 1962. By then, "Tigray's perennial disaffection" had been nourished by seven decades of Amhara political intrigues and machinations.

The *Kebessa's* identification with Tigray was shaped by the "chains of tradition" that seemed umbilical. Not only did *Kebessa* elites of the 1940s resent the confinement of *Ra'esi* Seyoum Mengesha in Shoa⁷⁹ but they also pleaded with the British not to hand over *Degiat* Haile Selassie Gugsu to the Amhara from his exile in Seychelles. Still further in the past, even the *Kebessa* chief Woldemichael, who was presented as an Eritrean hero during the armed struggle, was asserting a Tigrayan descent from the trans-Mereb chief *Ra'esi* Michael Suhul, a king-maker in 18th-century Ethiopia. Apparently, his claim to descent from Michael Suhul, was intended to give credibility to his hereditary political claims in Hamasien, the principal province of *Kebessa*. Just as Wolde-ab's Tigrayan descent was obvious even to foreigners such as the Pankhursts,⁸⁰ Woldemichael's claim to a Tigrayan descent was also well-known to foreigners such as Dye⁸¹ and Winstanley.⁸²

Prior to the onset of the insurrection, in fact, it was not only feudal chiefs such as Woldemichael or enlightened leaders like Wolde-ab who claimed descent from Tigray, but whole kinship groups as well. According to one of the British Governors of Eritrea, "Scores of kinship groups in Eritrea to-day claim origin in an ancestor immigrant from Tembien, Shire or Agame."⁸³ As the armed struggle waged and the "colonial"

claim by the political entrepreneurs demanded justification, though, the need to be different from Tigray became axiomatic.

In conclusion, following the "chains of tradition," people on both sides of the Mereb perceive a common trans-Mereb identity. Prior to the 1960s, too, political elites of the *Kebessa* and Tigray entertained similar notions of identity. The political actors of the post-1960 era, though, perceive divergent senses of identity.

Notes

1. Interview: *Abba* Gebreyonas Mengesha (66). July 13 1994. Mendefera.
2. Interview: *Bashai* Abraha Berhane.
3. Interview: *Haji* Nurahmed Imam (73), July 15, 1994. Mendefera.
4. Interview: *Nebru'ed* Belai Meressa (53), May 7, 1994. Axum.
5. Interview: *Sheikh* Raja Hagos (78), May 8, 1994. Axum.
6. Interview: *Qegnazmtach* Aberra Desta (Octogenarian). May 4, 1994. Axum.
7. Interview: Mr. Sultan Wendim (Octogenarian), May 6, 1994. Axum.
8. Interview: *Lega* Tiguhan Bezabeh Zamo (71), May 7, 1994. Axum.
9. Interview: Berhe Birarra (59), May 3, 1994. Axum.
10. Interview: Belay Kassa (75), May 6, 1994. Axum.
11. Epstein, 1978. p. 82.
12. Interview: Yisaaq Gebrehiwet.
13. Interview: *Bashai* Abraha Berhane.
14. Interview: Abebe Tetemke (48), May 7, 1994. Axum.
15. Rene Lemarchand, *Burundi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. p. XIV.
16. Interview: Belai Kassa.
17. Interview: *Haji* Mustafa Nurhussein (72), May 8, 1994. Axum.
18. Interview: *Haleqa* Sequar Abbay (85), May 6, 1994. Axum.
19. Lemarchand, 1994. p. 3.
20. Interview: Captain Gebregiorgis Gebreigziabher (74), Mendefera. July 12, 1994.

21. Interview: *Haleqa* Sequar Abbay.
22. Interview: *Haleqa* Gebrehiwet Woldeabzgi (52), May 8, 1994. Axum.
23. Interview: *Haji* Abdi Ibrahim (72), July 13, 1994. Mendefera.
24. Interview: *Haji* Mustafa Nurhussein (72), May 8, 1994. Axum.
25. Interview: Yisaaq Gebrehiwet. (emphasis added).
26. Longrigg, 1945. p. 112.
27. *Trevaskis Papers*. p. 139.
28. Lalibela was a king in the 12th century who built the rock-hewn churches in north central Ethiopia and has been elevated to a saintly status.
29. Interview: *Bashai* Gebreselassie Amanuel (94), July 15, 1994. Mendefera.
30. Interview: Yisaaq Gebrehiwet.
31. Interview: Negash Gebre-ab (62), July 15, 1994. Mendefera.
32. Interview: Yisaaq Gebrehiwet.
33. E. Weber, 1976. p. 47.
34. Interview: *Qeshi* Giday Gebremicha'el (72), Head of the Catholic Church. July 14, 1994. Mendefera.
35. Interview: *Fitawrari* Tesfai Teweldemedhin (77), July 13, 1994. Mendefera.
36. Interview: Habte Gebremedhin (54), July 14, 1994. Mendefera.
37. Interview: Yisaaq Gebrehiwet.
38. Cited in Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa: The Politics of Independence* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961. pp. 88-89.
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40. Isaacs, 1989. pp. 1, 24.
41. Interview: Kassech Asfaw (32), November 2, 1993. Washington D.C.
42. Interview: Bitew Belai (39), EPRDF Central Committee member, March 9, 1994. Addis Ababa.
43. Interview: Mohammed Yonus "Samora" (37), March 2, 1994. Addis Ababa.
44. Interview: Azeb Tewolde (36), Head of the Eritrean Research and Documentation Center, July 1, 1994. Asmara.
45. Interview: Gebrenegus Zeri'ae (49), July 5, 1994. Asmara.
46. Interview: Yemane Ghebreab.
47. Tesfatsion Medhanie, *Eritrea: Dynamics of a National Question*

- Amsterdam: B. R. Gruner, 1986. p. 35. Surprisingly, it was the TPLF, not the EPLF, that responded to the charges. For the TPLF's reaction see *Beret Hezbi Ertra Qulqul Afu Ayedifa'en Eyu!* TPLF. 1986 or 1987 (1979 Ethiopian Calendar), especially pp. 34-35.
48. Interview: Abba Yisaaq Gebreyesus (63), June 12, 1994. Asmara.
 49. Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce QU'UNE NATION?* Paris: Calmann Levy Freres, 1882. p. 24.
 50. TPLF, *Beret Hezbi Ertra Qulqul Afu Ayedefa'en Eyu!* p. 37.
 51. Interview: Tewodros Hagos (40), EPRDF Central Committee Member, February 16, 1994.
 52. Interview: Bitew Belai.
 53. Interview: Yemane Ghebreab.
 54. Interview: Mulu Hagos.
 55. Interview: Seyoum Tsehaye (42). Head of the Eritrean Television. June 10, 1994. Asmara.
 56. Interview: Girma Asmerom (43). Head, Africa Department, Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Asmara (now Eritrean ambassador to Ethiopia).
 57. Interview: Adhanom Gebremariam (45), EPLF Central Committee member and Governor of Seraye province. July 11, 1994. Mendefera.
 58. Interview: Abba Yisaaq Gebreyesus.
 59. Interview: Muhyedin Shengeb (32), EPLF Executive Committee member and Chairman of the Eritrean Youth Association. July 4, 1994, Asmara.
 60. Interview: Seyoum Tsehaye (42), Television Department Head. June 10, 1994. Asmara.
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 63. Interview: Kiflom Tasfamariam (40), June 15, 1994, Asmara.
 64. Interview: Azeb Tewolde.
 65. Interview: Adhanom Gebremariam.
 66. Interview: Gebremesqel Haile (44), TPLF Central Committee member. February 23, 1994. Addis Ababa.
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72. J. M. Yinger, "Interesting strands in the theorization of race and ethnic relations," in John Rex and David Mason ed. *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. p. 27.
73. Joseph Rothchild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981. p. 60.
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77. Emerson, 1960. p. 103; see also Smith, 1991. p. 11.
78. Isaacs, 1989. p. 24.
79. See, for example, Degiat Abraha Tessema's article in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. December 2, 1945. p. 3. Here he lamented the confinement of the grandson of Yohannes IV, "the only surviving patriot who could have been the leader of Tigray-Tigrignie."
80. Pankhurst, 1953. p. 20.
81. Dye, 1880. p. 285.
82. W. Winstanley, *A Visit to Abyssinia*. New York: Negro Universities Press, [1881] 1969. p. 213.
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HISTORY: A CHAIN OF TRADITIONS AND A SPRINGBOARD FOR IDENTITY



The previous chapter showed how differently political actors and civilians perceive their identity. The civilian sense of identity is shaped by the primordial factors while that of the political elites is shaped by instrumentally-motivated rational choice. In what follows, the history that forged the civilian sense of identity will be mapped out. The attitude of the rational actors towards their primordial past will also be shown. Finally the state mass violence, detailed in chapter 5, will be examined as a misguided policy that relegated the attempts of political entrepreneurs to invent identities inconsequential.

The history of the region starts with the myth of the union of the trans-Mereb Queen of Sheba and the Israeli King Solomon in the 10th century B.C. In this region, the story of the Queen, based on the Old Testament's narrative of her visit to Jerusalem to test King Solomon's wisdom, underwent its own refinement. The queen got pregnant by Solomon and gave birth to Menelik in the *Kebessa*.¹ When Menelik grew up, he went to visit his father in Jerusalem and returned with the Ark of the

Covenant, which is believed to be in Axum. The story has passed down the generations and even today people from both sides of the Mereb talk about it as if it happened yesterday. In trans-Mereb, the past is umbilical in connecting generations and retaining continuities.

Indeed, the Sheba and Solomon myth is a "lively corpse"² that has been dancing in the trans-Mereb for generations, shaping the nostalgic image of a pristine past. Referring to this syndrome which arises from "the heavy burdens imposed" by millennia-old history,³ Trevaskis wrote in the 1940s that the *Kebessa's*

traditional association with the Queen of Sheba and Menelik, her son by Solomon, are in themselves sufficient to have distinguished this part of the old Kingdom of Axum from its other provinces.⁴

Such belief in common origins sustains those other cultural elements of language and religion⁵ which create a rift between "us", the trans-Mereb kinfolk, and "them", the others:

It is desirable to emphasize the remarkable solidarity of this Tigrinya-speaking bloc, astride the present International Frontier. Its inhabitants are Ethiopian in physical type and Coptic in religion, and in these two points admittedly resemble the Amharic inhabitants of Ethiopia; they are, however, distinguished from the latter by a well-marked geographical boundary (the river Takkatse and Tsellari), by their language and by their distinct political history.⁶

The mythico-history of the Queen of Sheba is centered in and around Axum.⁷ Subsequently, Axum remained the religious and political center of the trans-Mereb Tigray which was the core of the Axumite Empire during the first millennium A.D.

Although the collapse of the Axumite Empire was followed by the rise of numerous chieftainships, Tigray, not infrequently, retained its primacy. For instance, in 18th century Ethiopia, it was the trans-Mereb Tigrayan chief *Ra'esi* Mika'el Suhul who

ultimately emerged as the king-maker in Gondar (1769-1780). Then, as always, there was a lot of population intermingling across the Mereb. For instance, a Tigrayan family from Ankere established a ruling dynasty in Carnescim, in the *Kebessa*, and many Tigrayans from south of the Mereb immigrated to the region.⁸ After Michael Suhul, two Tigrayan chiefs — *Ra'esi* Woldeselassie of Enderta and *Degiat* Sebagadis of Agame — retained Tigray's primacy in the Ethiopian feudal political climate.⁹ Yet, the "high rank" held by Tigrayans in the 18th- and 19th-century Ethiopian political arena lacked a dynastic continuity which turned out to be detrimental to their political identity:

No son of Mikael, nor of Walde Selassie, nor of Sebagadis could succeed. If the Tigrai had had the good fortune of Shoa in a line of rulers with enough of prestige to survive the shock of death and succession, it might well be an independent kingdom to-day. It possesses, as a political unit, all the requisite elements which Eritrea lacks.¹⁰

The sense of having had a "great" past, however, survived; and despite extreme economic, political and cultural domination, recurrent drought and unspeakable famine, the memory of a "golden" past was a symbol of Tigrayan identity. Such memory has been an eternal legacy that saved them from succumbing to an inferiority complex *vis-a-vis* the dominant Amhara. Apparently, it is also this memory of the "pristine" past that prevented them from having special regard even for the technologically superior Europeans. The Reverend Samuel Gobat, the future Bishop of Jerusalem, observed in the middle of the 19th century:

Formerly, the Abyssinians highly respected, and were quite attached to white men residing among them; and the same sentiments are still cherished in the interior districts. But in the province of Tigre they are generally despised; at least, the people manifest very little respect for them, ... This arises from the fact that having become

more or less acquainted with Europeans, they have enjoyed too many occasions of understanding their real character, and of observing that they are not superior to themselves in moral excellence, especially when surrounded by similar influences. I have never failed, however, even in Tigre, of securing suitable accommodations in any place where night overtook me; and often the people of the village where we stopped have shared with me and my attendants the very best of their provisions.¹¹

Out of the rich historical pool, it was the political dramas of the late 19th century (1872-1889) that current political entrepreneurs used and abused the most.

Alula's Political Drama: Alula left a lasting name by defeating the Egyptians at Gundet (1875) and Gura (1876), the Mahdists at Kufit (1885), the Italians at Dogali (1887), relieving the Anglo-Egyptian garrisons from entrapments by the Mahdists in eastern Sudan (1884) and playing a major role at Adua (1896) against the Italians. By marching from victory to victory, "His list of successes was almost unbroken."¹² Referring to his military capability, Augustus Wylde, the British correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian*, who knew Alula for almost two decades, described him as "the best general and strategist that Africa has perhaps produced in modern times."¹³

The Egyptian army that Alula defeated at Gura was well equipped, trained and led by Americans and Europeans, as the British Consul-General in Egypt, General Staton, stated:

... the Egyptian army at this epoch was the finest native army that existed, and it had been brought to this perfection by a competent staff of American officers who had seen plenty of service in their country.¹⁴

Having stopped the Egyptian threat, Alula had to deal with Mahdist Sudan, Italy and Menelik's Shoa. In accordance with the Hewett Treaty (1884), signed between Britain and Ethiopia, Alula relieved and safely delivered the Anglo-Egyptian army

that was sandwiched by the Mahdists in eastern Sudan. He accomplished "what England with all her resources was unfortunately unable to perform."¹⁵ By so doing, the Ethiopians gained the enmity of Mahdist Sudan whom Alula later defeated at Kufit in 1885.

Alula's fame did not end with the passage of power to the Amhara. In fact, according to Wylde, he played a crucial role at the battle of Adua as the "Chief of Staff."¹⁶ His part in the battle was so invaluable that an Italian lamented "That old Alula is always fatal to us."¹⁷ It was these talents that made a British historian describe him as "The greatest leader that Abyssinia has produced since the death of Emperor Theodor in 1868."¹⁸

Alula also had an honest, kind and attractive personality and he left a positive impression on foreign visitors:

I can only say that my acquaintance with this man lasted for nearly twenty years, and I always found him most kind and sincere, and what he said could be believed; and although he defeated the Italians, they bore him no ill-will, and they used to call him the Garibaldi of Abyssinia.¹⁹

A French missionary whom Alula told he was going to take Massawa said in 1879: "Everyone, his enemies foremost, agrees that Ras Alula is frank, determined and steadfast. What he says he is going to do, he does."²⁰

The British delegate of Sudan's Governor-General Gordon, Winstanley, who did not shy away from speaking his mind on what he thought about Ethiopians, knew Alula. This self-described "veracious chronicler," for instance, called a certain chief, Bashaw Mari, "without doubt the most stupid native I had yet encountered."²¹ Yet, even this merciless critic had nothing bad to say about Alula: "I was certainly much pre-possessed with the appearance of the Ras Alulu, who looked by far the best bred and most handsome Abyssinian I had yet seen ..."²²

Wylde's description of Alula as "a brave, straightforward, trustful native gentleman,"²³ supports an earlier description of him by Winstanley as "Very pleasant in his manner -he always talked unaffectedly, and without restraint."²⁴

Alula, whom Portal referred to as the "great Ras Alula" or simply "the great man,"²⁵ Wylde knew as "that very gifted fighting man,"²⁶ Berkeley called "the redoubtable Ras Alula"²⁷ and the British Governor of Eritrea, Longrigg, half-a-century later, came to learn about "the famous Ras Alula,"²⁸ is also credited for transforming the small remote village of Asmara into his capital in 1884.²⁹ Here he had one of his principal functionaries, *Degiat* Engda "Abba Shawul," in charge of the munitions stores.³⁰ And his main functionary left his name "Abba Shawul" to the most famous "native quarter" in Europeanized Asmara.

Alula is also well remembered for his excellent administration. Whilst his boss, the Emperor, is criticized for his briefly-held fanatical Christian policy, Alula did not share Yohannes's outlook. He did not even implement the Emperor's proclamation that all Muslims had to be baptized.³¹ According to Wylde, "Fanaticism was never one of his weak points, as he never interfered with the Moslems in his governorate, and several of his agents and many of his soldiers were of this religion."³²

Woldemichael's Political Drama: Pax Alula which inaugurated the *Kelessa's* golden age demanded the removal of the recalcitrant regional chief *Ra'esi* Woldemichael Solomon. While still struggling for primacy in the *Kelessa* against Emperor Tewodros's appointee in Hamasien and Seraye, *Degiat* Hailu of Tse'azaga in late 1860s, Woldemichael crossed the Mereb and joined the future Emperor Yohannes³³ by whom he was groomed.

The honeymoon between Woldemichael and Yohannes lasted until the battle of Gundet (1875) where Woldemichael fought on the side of his emperor against the Egyptian expansionists. But when Yohannes denied him the governorship of the *Kelessa*, keeping it under his arch rival, *Degiat* Hailu of Tse'azaga, Woldemichael rebelled and joined the Egyptian camp. Even as he submitted to the Egyptians, he was not someone who could make a huge difference from the military point of view. Dye, the American colonel in the Egyptian service, described Woldemichael's submission:

... he made a grand entry into our encampment. His three hundred followers, who were also on horseback, dress, arms, etc., - the *tout ensemble*, - the flag end of all conditions of semi-barbarous life: rebels, deserters and thieves were all represented, as was proven by the lack of hands and feet among our visitors ...³⁴

In his march to primacy in the *Kebessa*, Woldemichael did not refrain from ravaging the very region to which he laid hereditary claim.³⁵ Particularly, after the battle of Gura, "He shortly commenced to raid and devastate the seat of his old Government, turned the Hamasien plateau, ... into a howling wilderness of ruined houses, with a few half-starved peasants. The nameless horrors that have been perpetrated in this once happy country are impossible to describe, nor would they be believed if they were put on paper."³⁶ During his post-Gura mindless campaigns, Woldemichael killed *Degiat* Hailu and ravaged Tse'azaga.³⁷

After subduing Tse'azega, he became the master of the whole of Hamasein, Seraye, and most of Akele Guzai, Bogos and Halhal:

These victories were followed by the most ruthless extermination of every element that might prove dangerous. Hundreds of unfortunate wretches were put to the sword and village after village was set on fire. And it is therefore not surprising that even to this day the memory of Weldenkiel [Woldemichael] remains fresh in the minds of the Moslem Belien and his present aversion to Ethiopian rule is largely the outcome of the sufferings his fathers endured at the hands of this barbarous ruffian.³⁸

Woldemichael's brutality was also shown in Dambezan, supposed to be the cradle of modern Hamasien and Akele Guzai. Its ruling autonomous dynasty claimed descent from the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Woldemichael devastated it, rendering a *coup de grace* to its autonomy.³⁹ Such brutality made a *Kebessa* priest describe him as "a fratricide and a patricide."⁴⁰

In reference to his ruthlessness, "oppressive raids and exactions,"⁴¹ he earned the title "Gomida" which means brute, literally "chopper."

Nor did his submission to the Egyptians earn him any respect. In the Egyptian service, he was made "Ferik Pacha" and called "Michael Pacha."⁴² For his treachery, he was contemptuously nicknamed "*Ra'esi Ali*" in his home region of the *Kebessa*.⁴³

Woldemichael's *Kebessa* was located between the interior and the coast, which Yohannes and Alula were determined to take from all foreign hands. The emperor told Winstanley in 1879: "I do not wish a consul at Massowah—I wish Massowah."⁴⁴ In the same year, Alula told a French missionary: "I have come to retake Massawa from the Egyptians, I will not go away until my horse has drunk from the Red Sea."⁴⁵ Given the strategic location of the *Kebessa*, therefore, it was only natural for Yohannes to worry about the behavior of the chief in the part of his domains where foreign forces had their eyes on. As "the brutal tyrant of the Hamasien and Serae,"⁴⁶ Woldemichael was enough of a "local nuisance necessitating the king keeping a larger force under arms in the Hamasien than he otherwise would have done."⁴⁷

After the Battle of Gura and the defeat of Egyptians with whom Woldemichael was allied, Alula resorted to a trick and obtained the submission of Woldemichael⁴⁸ who was initially taken prisoner at Amba Selama. Later, his confinement was relaxed:

I knew the man intimately, and last saw him at Abbi-Addi in the province of Tembien in 1896, ... He was allowed a certain amount of liberty and had about fifty unarmed followers with him, but his influence had gone.⁴⁹

Married to an Axumite, he lived the rest of his life in Axum in forced retirement until his death in 1906.⁵⁰ With Woldemichael out of the political scene in the *Mereb-Mellash*, Alula ruled the region "without firing" for twelve years until 1889 when Italy came to transform it into "Eritrea."⁵¹

Other Actors in the Drama: The *Kebessa* also had other major actors in its political drama such as *Ra'esi* Araya Dimtsu, the emperor's uncle and influential governor of Akele Guzai. His son, Debbab Araya, was even more influential in Akale Guzai as a rebel against his own cousin, the emperor.

During his rebellious years, Debbab was at home all over the *Mereb-Mellash*—from Akele Guzai to Habab and to Semhar.⁵² This ambitious rebel had a lot of followers in the region.⁵³ His influence was so formidable, that had he not been killed in 1891, it is not certain whether Akele Guzai would have belonged to Debbab or Bahta Hagos who managed to carve out a political niche in the region. In whatever capacity, Araya Dimtsu and Debbab were at home north of the Mereb since there was no boundary separating the two halves of the trans-Mereb Tigray.

Bahta Hagos, a native of Akele Guzai, also rebelled against the emperor. Feud and personal vendetta with the family of *Ra'esi* Araya Dimtsu forced him into rebellion on the eve of the Ethio-Egyptian War of 1875-76.⁵⁴ Due to the parochial and personal nature of his resistance, he did not attempt to create a coalition of *Kebessa* chiefs against Yohannes.

Nor did any of the rebels have a sense of identity distinct from that of Tigray proper even under Italian colonial rule. Thus when Bahta arrested the Italian resident of Seganeiti (Akele Guzai), Giovanni Sanguinetti in 1894, the Italian is reported to have said: "God will punish you ... Italy is great." But Bahta's response was: "Ethiopia is greater still."⁵⁵ Clearly he did not conceptualize an Eritrean nationalism. He entertained a vague sense of Ethiopian-ness and a belatedly developed anti-Italian sentiment, as his famous warning to his brother suggests:

Sengal haway amena ayti'ashu
tsa'eda taman ente'de'a nekisu
*da'la'lika ayirekebin fewsu.*⁵⁶

Sengal, my bother, do not be fooled
 If a white snake bites,
 there is no medicine for it.

Bahta was not worried about the "black snakes" south of the Mereb whom he regarded as his natural allies; he was only concerned about the "white snakes" who were in Akele Guzai. As Wolde-ab remarked, his messages for support were all sent south of the Mereb and not to other parts of the *Kebessa* or *Metahit*.⁵⁷

After Bahta's rebellion was crushed, his brother Sengal fled to *Ra'esi* Mengesha Yohannes south of the Mereb and the latter refused the Italian request for his extradition.⁵⁸ The relations between Akele Guzai and Tigray across the new international border were a lot closer than Akele Guzai's relations with fellow *Kebessa* provinces of Seraye and Hamasien.

Sources of Tigray's "Je me souviens" Syndrome: Rich historical pools, as seen in the trans-Mereb, foreshadow a sense of communal identity.⁵⁹ With a "golden" past in the background, it was not easy for the Tigrayan feudalists to accept the loss of power to the Amhara in 1889. The repugnance to Amhara overlordship was expressed by Alula who, in 1891, told an Italian journalist that:

This country is ours, and if we submitted to Menelik it is because we became very few after Metemmah ... I have my master who is the son of King Giovanni (Yohannes), why should I look for another in Scioa? ... Tigre cannot be a servant of Scioa, because our people are soldiers, while the Shoans fight only against people armed with spears.⁶⁰

In addition to the loss of power, the fact that the Amhara rulers gave away the northern half of the trans-Mereb to Italy in 1889 angered Tigrayan chiefs. It was this magnanimity and the alliance with the Italian colonialists that made Berkeley describe Menelik as "a traitor to his race."⁶¹ Accordingly, Gundet, Gura, Kufit and Dogali, *inter alia*, where Tigrayans under Alula and Yohannes successfully defended their country against outside forces, were now located in *L'Africa Orientale Italiana*. Menelik was rewarded with a loan of four million lire for his consent.⁶²

Consequently, just as the *Kebessa* felt betrayed by Menelik — “*nous restâmes perdue (aux mains de l’Italien)*,”⁶³ the Tigrayan elites south of the Mereb could not forgive him for his actions:

The northern chiefs felt especially aggrieved that Menelik, by the Treaty of Ucciali, had handed over to Italy a considerable block of their territory and the records show that for many years Menelik could not be sure of their loyalty.⁶⁴

Wars can serve as crucibles for a collective sense of identity.⁶⁵ And political and military elites, such as Alula, whose ethnic consciousness was being territorialized by protracted wars, were harboring frustrated aspirations and unappeasable bitterness against the Amhara. Alula and the other Tigrayan elites who “had never sworn allegiance to Italy”⁶⁶ and who were resentful to the Amhara rule, emerged as champions of Tigrayan independence in the 19th century pre-modern era: “Ras Alula and Ras Mangasha were defending their territory of Tigre against the Italian field-force on the North, and against Menelik’s Shoans on the South.”⁶⁷

Beyond making sporadic resistance, however, Tigrayans did not seriously challenge the Amhara supremacy until the post-Italian era. As the absolutist Amhara state staggered to consolidate its power in lieu of the Italian rule in the early 1940s, lawlessness overwhelmed eastern Tigray — a situation which was aggravated by the absence of its hereditary leaders — *Ra’esi* Seyoum Mengesha and *Degiat* Haile Selassie Gugsa. These were the circumstances that led to the rise and sudden growth of the 1943 *Weyane*⁶⁸ insurgency whose leaders tried to couch in ethno-regional terms as anti-Amhara and anti-Shoa.⁶⁹ Its principal leader *Blatta* Hailemariam Redda, for instance, used to claim that the British were on the side of the *Weyane* against the Amhara.⁷⁰ Beyond this kind of rudimentary sense of an “us and them” dichotomy, even the *Blatta* did not have a clearly-stated nationalist program. More than the *Weyane*’s Tigrayan ethnic nationalist agenda, therefore, it was its brutal suppression by the British air force, escorted by a marauding and para-

sitic Amhara army, that left a deep wound among the people. The wound nourished the "*Je me souviens*" mentality.

The *Weyane* started in Wajirat as a movement for the defence of the local traditional system of governance, as one elder recalled:

Wajirat used to have its own administrative system ... Wajirat has twenty mountains. Depending on the need, [representatives of] the twenty mountains used to meet in Gra-Gerebo for discussion on various issues and to make laws. But it was a must that the [representatives of the] twenty mountains meet once a year ... The leaders of the twenty mountains were electing a coordinator every year. It was these leaders who administered the people of the twenty mountains [Wajirat] ... This was our custom. This was our system.

The Haile Selassie regime told us to abandon our system. It wanted to appoint an administrator for us. It wanted to collect taxes with its own officials ...

A government administers a people in order to maintain law and order; and we wanted to maintain peace and stability ourselves. A government needs taxes; and we wanted to collect taxes for the government ourselves through our own elected officials from the twenty mountains. Why did the government insist on coming and trampling over us?⁷¹

Having started as a local movement that took arms in defence of its traditions, the *Weyane* had little pan-Tigrayan political agenda. Even the oath the rebels made to forge unity among themselves contained nothing to suggest Tigrayan ethnic nationalism:

May we be lame
May we be blind
May we be mute
May we be sterile
If we fail to work for our *adi* (home region)

If we do not fulfill the objectives of the *Gareb* (stream)
Let this be our curse.⁷²

The stream (*Gareb*) and the "twenty mountains" of Wajirat (*Adi*) show the parochial nature of peasant uprisings in general. For instance, the peasant actors in Mau Mau (Kenya), that took place a decade after the *Weyane*, had minimal pan-Kenyan nationalist content. As in the case of the *Weyane*, the institution of the oath was developed and utilized as a mechanism for achieving unity and discipline. The objective was local and the oath was similar:

That I shall go forward to fight for the land,
The lands of Kirinyaga that we cultivated,
The lands which were taken by the European.
And if I fail to do this
May this oath kill me,
May this seven kill me,
May this meat kill me.⁷³

Its local objectives notwithstanding, the *Weyane* ended up spreading out and overwhelming eastern Tigray. Despite its lack of lucid goals, it scored stunning military victories, defeating government forces one after another until the British intervened.

History, Political Actors and Rationalizing Goals

Elites know that it is by returning to the past and by furnishing maps and moralities that they can regenerate and mobilize their communities. They realize that a nation needs to be deep-rooted,⁷⁴ their principal goal in entering the past being the search for heroes. The accomplishments of summoned heroes would be elaborated, and the need to do more in order to achieve the "greatness" of the forefathers highlighted.⁷⁵

The TPLF: The Tigrayan sense of having had a "golden" past and profound historical grievances offered the TPLF the most ideal grist for their nationalist mill. On the "pristine" side, the

monolithic stele of Axum, erected sometimes during the early centuries of the Christian era, was depicted at the center of the TPLF insignia, reminiscent of the Axumite "golden" era. It is also meant to remind the people of their common heritage and cultural kinship, giving them a sense of identity that forges their communal belongingness. Axum became to Tigray what Mount Ararat is to Armenia. As such, the Tigrayan ethnîe was expected to become, as Anthony Smith would say, "a faith-achievement" community, able to surmount obstacles and hardships.⁷⁶

Thus, Axum's liberation from the *Dergue* in February 1988 had "a special resonance for the people."⁷⁷ It was in view of Axum's significance to the Tigrayan sense of identity that the TPLF gave a sharp-tongued reaction to the *Dergue's* aerial bombardment of it in 1988:

On its way to the grave, the fascist WPE [Workers Party of Ethiopia, *Dergue*] is trying to destroy everything, including the historic town of Axum ... A clear demonstration of the desire to destroy our history and our people ... Even when Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia, it prevented its forces from attacking Axum. By bombing Axum from the air, the *Dergue* has revealed how much of an enemy it is to the Tigrayan people ... [Axum is] the center of our history and the town that expresses our identity.⁷⁸

Summoning the past was easy for the TPLF. The end of the 19th century when Tigrayans gained supremacy over the Amhara feudalists was easily traced. Dogali, for instance, where Alula defeated the Italians in 1887 was presented as a victory of Tigrayans on behalf of all Africans, demonstrating blacks can defeat European colonialists:

The Dogali victory, unlike the distortion of the Amhara historians, is not the victory of all Ethiopian peoples. It is the victory of the peoples of Tigray and Eritrea ... At that time, Yohannes subdued and collected taxes and tributes from Gondar, Gojjam, Shoa and Wello. But no

country with the name Ethiopia was known in the world map and history. Even the Shoan king Menelik was collaborating with Italy which was making preparations to invade Eritrea and Tigray. In an attempt to weaken Tigray he was secretly dealing with the Italians. Italy was then giving Menelik money and arms.⁷⁹

However, the TPLF did try to be cautious when summoning up the past, due to the difficulty of reconciling Marxism with nationalism. Picking heroes from the feudal past was in direct contradiction with its anti-feudal revolutionary stand. Thus, it was only implicitly that Yohannes IV and other feudal chiefs were raised to heroism. Only the people they led in the struggle against the Amhara ruling classes and external enemies were openly praised. One, *Ra'esi* Alula, was exempted from the harsh TPLF attacks on everything feudal. The contradictions he had with the Amhara ruling classes were stressed as mobilizing tools in the armed struggle. His military genius was also exalted so much so that the TPLF named one of its army divisions after him.

For the TPLF, Yohannes's ascendancy to power and his subsequent military victories against foreign forces created "a sense of patriotism and unity among the Tigrayan people." The Amhara under Menelik are presented as the reference group against whom the Tigrayan self-identity sought to be established. Since Menelik was striking deals with the Egyptian and Italian aggressors while Yohannes was fighting against them, he was presented as the "relevant other" to promote Tigrayan identity awareness.

The loss of primacy to the Amhara was decried by the TPLF for ushering in "the misfortunes of Tigray" which until then

was known by various names and was autonomous ... But after the death of Yohannes IV it fell to Shoan hegemony under Minelik II. Thereafter its autonomy and independence was lost and fell under the centralized rule of Shoa. Parts of its territory were torn away from it, to disrupt the unity of its people, to starve them and to speed up the Amhara acculturation of its people.⁸⁰

This sense of undeserved subjection to the Amhara is what John Markakis aptly calls "Tigray's perennial disaffection." Not different from the Tartar wailing against Russian overlordship of "How did it happen that we became slaves of our former slaves,"⁸¹ the crux of the Tigrayan lamentation is encoded in a folk poem:

Kamay ekum Menelikay bayza? (2)
Gebri do tamtse'u aynaberkumun ba'azeza?
Faras do tetse'enu aynaberkumun ba'azeza?
Atum kamay ekum Menelikay bayza?
Mantsef do aynaberkumun kam agoza?
*Atekum do lomus sab zayblu gaza!*⁸²

How are you my dear Menelik?
 Weren't you bringing taxes on command?
 Weren't you loading horses on command?
 And you, how are you my dear Menelik?
 Weren't you hide mat?
 Alas! Now you entered a masterless house.

Periods of hardships, were invoked to map and remap popular identity consciousness, because these tend to be stronger forgers of nationhood than happy times.⁸³ Just as the Afrikaner's Trek of 1838 generated a series of potent legends which emerged as important symbols of their endurance and resilience, promoting their solidarity and nationalist identity,⁸⁴ the hardships during the *Weyane* and the immediate aftermath have served as forgers of people's self-consciousness in eastern Tigray.

For three decades, in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s the *Weyane* and its harsh suppression remained precious raw material awaiting elites to pick and carry to their nationalist mill. In the aftermath of the suppression, the political screws were tightened against the "rebellious ethnies." Further, the Amhara ruling classes did nothing to appease the people so that they could forget all about the *Weyane* and its harsh suppression.

The wounds from the 1943 *Weyane* did not require deep historical studies to recall. The TPLF, which assumed the custodianship of its memory, argued that its brutal suppression

was meant to weaken Tigrayans so that they would not raise their heads again. Exorbitant taxes had been imposed; property was confiscated; land had been expropriated and apportioned among Amhara feudalists; and soldiers had been billeted for two years in their homes.⁸⁵ Summoning the *Weyane* was meant to give the impression that the present is a continuum with the past.

As custodians of the memory of the *Weyane*, the political actors mapped out a utopian vision. At the culmination of "Tigray's perennial disaffection," their forefathers did shake off the Amhara hegemony which was only rescued by the British intervention. And now, they argued, they could challenge the Amhara hegemony as did their forefathers: "Our heroic parents refused to accept oppression and exploitation. It is a history we are proud of."⁸⁶ This was a way of summoning the past to explain the present and "construct a culture of resistance."⁸⁷ They collected stories, poems and songs and revitalized them. A song sang in the aftermath of the First *Weyane* suppression was revived and popularized during the Second *Weyane*:

Qolo segem beli'kayo qaharye
*haset ember Weyane do yese'areye.*⁸⁸

Eating roasted barley gives a heartburn,
 It is a lie that the *Weyane* can be beaten.

Revitalizing such songs was meant to give the perception that it was the *Weyane* of 1943 that was resurrected in 1975. Thus when the TPLF named their insurgency the "Second *Weyane*," it was a well-calculated step designed to harness the strong feelings the people have had about the First *Weyane*. They named their bi-monthly organ *Weyin* and their combatants *Weyenti*. *Weyane* was the most effectively employed historical event. The term has found its way into the Tigrinya vocabulary to mean "revolution."

Enriched by events like the 1943 *Weyane*, the historical pool was readily available for political entrepreneurs to remap popular consciousness. If such passionate symbols did not exist in

the historical pool, however, their fabrication would be a necessity. The name and the state of Pakistan, for instance, were "synthetic"⁸⁹ and they "had not been there yesterday morning."⁹⁰ Yet, it is claimed that Pakistan is one of the oldest and most illustrious countries in the world.⁹¹ The post-colonial states of Ghana and Mali have summoned their names from the huge and rich Western Sudan states of Ghana (7th-14th century) and Mali (14th-15th century). The link is far-fetched as they are not even geographically congruent. For instance, medieval Ghana is to the north of today's Ghana. But the names stuck because the claim was not made at the expense of a pre-existing historical pool. Similarly, the 19th-century Mahdist uprising becomes a Sudanese nationalist movement only through retrospective interpretation;⁹² and it has worked because it did not contradict historical facts, public myths and perceptions. Thus, although traditions can be invented,⁹³ they resonate only if they are not radically different from what is available in the historical pool. Otherwise, the invention of memory could be a bumpy road, as it was for the Eritrean political elites.

To link medieval Ghana with modern Gold Coast, the Mahdist uprising with the current Sudanese nationalism, or the early *Weyane* with the TPLF uprising (1975-1991), there must be symbols which serve as ingredients of the people's identity. The scars from the suppression of the *Weyane* were still fresh in the people's minds, constituting important parts of "Tigray's perennial disaffection." And they were reopened easily in an ethnonationalist upheaval. From the academic point of view, "To suggest the *Weyane* was a nationalist revolt is really to indulge in myth-making."⁹⁴ Yet, myth or fact, the *Weyane* proved to be the most valuable and potent raw material for the Tigrayan ethnonationalist mill.

As in the rest of the Third World,⁹⁵ the Tigrayan ethnic nationalist movement took a separatist path. Using the ethnic card, the TPLF started its armed struggle to establish an independent Tigrayan republic:

At this time, national contradiction is sharpened to the extent that speaking Tigrinya can be punishable by

death, detention, denial of job, etc. Such oppressive conditions have given the Tigrayan people strong national feelings to struggle against national and class oppression. And (under those circumstances) to struggle with the rest of Ethiopia is impractical.⁹⁶

Secession became the declared goal: "As an oppressed nationality, Tigray has of necessity chosen this path of emancipation."⁹⁷ In the course of time, secession was diluted by a vaguer objective: "To eliminate national domination and restore the national rights of the Tigrayan people."⁹⁸ Even as late as 1985, the TPLF claimed it was not fighting to decide what was good for the Tigrayans but only to secure their right to self-determination: "Whether the people of Tigray will decide to establish their own independent government or will opt to live with the other peoples of Ethiopia is a question that is not yet answered. And that decision can only be made by the people of Tigray themselves, not by any other force."⁹⁹ The goal slipped into a pan-Ethiopian agenda and the people had practically no say on its slippery nature. Yet, even when the TPLF espoused a pan-Ethiopian goal, they did not completely abandon the option to secede.¹⁰⁰ Although "unity on the basis of equality" is preferred, the TPLF contended, "It is not for cosmetic reasons that we add 'up to secession' with self-determination."¹⁰¹ Genuine unity should guarantee a people, the TPLF argued, their right to secede whenever they wish:

To avoid secession, there must be an unequivocal guarantee for the right to secede. If unity is a prison with no exit, then not only will people refuse to enter but those that are inside will force themselves out. However, if unity is like a hall where one can come in and leave as one opts, then people can live in peace and with trust.¹⁰²

As the TPLF abandoned secession, it began to argue "A true Tigrayan can be a true Ethiopian."¹⁰³ As such, "Tigrayans will struggle against [Amhara] chauvinists who think Ethiopia belongs to them alone. And they consider themselves as the donors of the certificate of Ethiopian-ness to others."¹⁰⁴

For the Tigrayan rational actors, the relationship between the emotional and the interest aspects of politicized ethnicity was too obvious. One of the TPLF's strong men, Sebhat Negga, candidly summarized the zig-zag revolutionary course of the TPLF:

Tigrayan independence was a last option, and when we were teaching the popular masses, we gave them the impression we were fighting for independence. There was indeed a tendency towards secession among fighters. In 1985, a self-criticism was made among TPLF forces and narrow nationalist tendencies were denounced ... We had to wait for ten years to tackle the problem of narrow nationalism because the TPLF works on priorities. We were made to fight a number of battles and we had to tackle numerous other problems which were pertinent to the very survival of the organization. After 1985, more than just passing remarks, we were teaching more emphatically that we were fighting for Ethiopia's unity based on equality ... Before 1985, "Maybe" used to be the answer to the question "Could the Amhara oppressed masses be our allies?" "Would they struggle for emancipation?" Again the answer was "They may." So there used to be a lot of suspicion against the Amhara. That was why we stressed Tigrayan nationalism - language, culture, etc.¹⁰⁵

The ethnic nationalist course was pursued as the most effective means of achieving goals only after assessing self-interests, appraising social reality and weighing the net advantages of actions.¹⁰⁶ Implicit in Sebhat's claim is that the political actors have been consistent in their aversion to ethnic politics which they had disdained as Marxist students in the university. In an about face, they became ethnic nationalists in 1975, fighting for "Tigrayan self-determination from the oppressive Amhara rule." They found ethnicity instrumental for mobilization and the seizure of power.¹⁰⁷ They "turned to their people" whom they "invited into history,"¹⁰⁸ nationalism's main source

of emotional strength which continued to be unearthed, "reappearing like a Hindu holy man from his pit."¹⁰⁹

In effect, the Tigrayan rational actors were leading a costly ethnic nationalist war without being ethnic nationalists themselves. True to their Leninist orientations, they espoused the ethnonationalist course in order to use the emotion it sparks and abort it ultimately. Harnessing powerful nationalist forces to the revolution and vanquishing them when mission is accomplished is a Leninist policy.¹¹⁰ Just as the Bolsheviks accepted secession of Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states because the military balance did not favor them,¹¹¹ the Tigrayans accepted the forceful separation of Eritrea as a *fait accompli*.

Yet many, including the *Dergue*, perceived that the TPLF was fighting for secession. For some civilians, "'liberation' meant secession. That was the goal of the TPLF. It was only when they got stronger that they changed their goal to liberate the whole of Ethiopia."¹¹² Most were caught off guard when it dawned on them that the TPLF was aiming at the state machinery itself. This was the case with their enemy, the *Dergue*:

The TPLF has abandoned its original goal of "*liberating Tigray from the Amhara oppressive rule*" and they are struggling to "*liberate the Ethiopian people*" ... Now they have a very dangerous slogan of "*Tigray is Ethiopian and we are Ethiopians.*"¹¹³

The TPLF did not clearly define the "Tigrayan Question." This gave them ample space to flip-flop from secession to "unity with equality," and if no equality then secession. For the *Dergue*:

The TPLF does not have a rigid stand like the EPLF. It changes its goals according to situations and claims that its previous goals were based on "immaturity" and admits its weaknesses. This has been helpful for the TPLF to come closer with other organizations.¹¹⁴

Nor was the goal of the TPLF clear to their ally, the EPLF:

The goal of the TPLF was not clear. Victory came before they made their objectives clear ... It was only after the battle of Shire in 1988, when ultimate victory was no longer remote, that they unequivocally stated they were fighting to overthrow the *Dergue*.¹¹⁵

As a secessionist organization, the TPLF would not have been a serious threat to the *Dergue*. Independent Tigray could never be economically viable, nor would it easily get international recognition, nor would the government fail to mobilize other peoples against it. It would have had a shorter life span than Biafra. Once the TPLF stood for an all-Ethiopian cause, though, it earned at least the indifference of the non-Tigrayan peasantry. Caught off guard, the *Dergue* did not have the proper ammunition for counter propaganda against the "new" TPLF. Out of desperation it decided to use the ethnic card, publicly claiming the EPLF and TPLF were fighting for a "Tigray-Tigrignie" state:

The [1943] *Weyane* had an objective of creating a Greater Tigray state. It was supported by *Dejazmatch* [sic] Tessema Asberom, Mengesha Seyoum, Wolde-ab Woldemariam, *Dejazmatch* Haile Selassie Gugsu.

[And now] what does *Weyane* [the TPLF] stand for? It is a movement for an anti-Ethiopian unity, for Tigray-Tigrignie nationality or the Tigrinya-speaking population ...¹¹⁶

The people and the fighting forces, too, did not internalize the shift of the TPLF from a secessionist to an all-Ethiopian agenda either. As late as 1989, they did not know they had to fight for the whole of Ethiopia. This lack of awareness is quite expected among the fighting forces and civilians because the assessment of self-interest, appraisal of social reality and cost-benefit calculations tend to be more explicit among leaders and more implicit among rank-and-file combatants and civilians.¹¹⁸ As a result, after liberating Tigray in 1989, they refused to proceed beyond their homeland, saying

"We have liberated Tigray and we do not want to proceed any further. Let the Amhara fight for their own causes." Parents said "no more!" combatants, too, said "that is it!" This standstill, popularly known as *Dewta*, lasted for a year during which time the TPLF gave its rebuttal saying that *Dewta* was a reflection of "narrow nationalism."¹¹⁸

Anticipating this difficulty, Gebru Tareke had expressed his skepticism that after "criticizing its initial actions as manifestations of 'narrow national deviations,'" the TPLF has shifted to a pan-Ethiopian agenda; and "it remains to be seen whether 'nationalizing' the peasantry will be as easy a task as 'tribalizing' them."¹¹⁹ According to the TPLF, one year-long *Dewta* was all it took to "detribalize" a peasantry that had been "tribalized" for 15 years. *Dewta* was beaten after year-long discussions convinced the people and the rank-and-file fighters that unless the *Dergue* was dislodged from power, Tigray's emancipation would not be complete; nor would the aerial attacks cease. Hence *Weyin* editorialized, "To secure our self-interests, we will struggle for the creation of a Democratic Ethiopia":

Some people who either did not clearly understand our goals or who wanted to distort our objectives have been expecting us to establish an independent national state of Tigray. However, we will never cease from the struggle to create a democratic Ethiopia.¹²⁰

The EPLF: The difficulty of creating a nation out of invented symbols and myths which are not congruent with the memory of the people was most conspicuous among Eritrean political entrepreneurs. Eritrea was not a typical colonial artifact that lacked a pre-colonial history. Unlike many colonial artifacts whose pre-colonial history tends to be empty, Eritrea's is hardly a *tabula rasa*. Undoubtedly, as a multi-ethnic colonial artifact, created by "an act of surgery" from surrounding communities, Eritrea does not share a "collective memory." However, the *Kebessa*, which is dominant, from the demographic, economic,

political and cultural points of view, shares the rich trans-Mereb "collective memory."

During the armed struggle, Eritrean elites tried to use their colonial experience and the abrogation of their federal status as tools of mobilization. However, these did not prove to be effective tools because exposure to the Western culture by virtue of having been colonized and the privileges of a federal status were minimally felt by the peasant masses. And they were too recent to be fancifully misrepresented. Thus they could not even spark the type of potent emotions that can be generated by ancient history. For insurgency, ancient history which can be freely fanciful and infinitely romanticized, may provide "its organizing principle and legitimation, its *raison d'être*."¹²¹

Consequently, reading the writings on the historical wall, Eritrean elites relied on the act of bold negation as their *modus operandi*. They downplayed the trans-Mereb identity symbols that elites of the previous generation used. For example, although Axum has no symbolic meaning for the current political elites, it was the source of identity for their predecessors:

The religious and political centre of the Tigrinya-speaking population is in this city. As the population of Israel are waiting for the rise of Zion, so the Tigrinya-speaking people are waiting for the rise of Axum.¹²²

On the contrary, the current elites even went as far as claiming the "colonization" of their region by the Axumite Empire:

For more than two thousand years, Eritrea with its old name 'Medri Bahri' ... was a free self-governing country with its own kings 'Bahri Negasi' ... Throughout the past centuries, the Eritrean people have risen up with unity and determination against the attempts of attack on the Eritrean border made by the Axumite Kingdom ...¹²³

The attempt to create a rift in the trans-Mereb identity continued, claiming that until the close of the 19th century:

the peoples of present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia lived essentially apart from each other and in a state of mutual isolation. Accordingly, these two neighboring peoples have had their own distinctly separate courses of historical development even before the coming of Italian colonialism.¹²⁴

The current rational actors do not harshly decry the behavior of Menelik II, the Amhara chief who succeeded Yohannes IV as emperor of Ethiopia and who left Eritrea to the Italians. The Liberal Progressive Party and other anti-Unionists of the 1940s and 1950s used to be harshly critical of the Amhara and Menelik for having "sold" them without any morality to the Italians. Thus, they argued, they had no reason or desire to "return" to Ethiopia. The EPLF, on the other hand, argue they were "sold" to the Italians because the Amhara knew Eritrea was not theirs. They contend that had the Amhara regarded Eritrea as theirs, they would not have abandoned it after Adua (1896) when they could regain it.¹²⁵ The act of negation was so bold that even the principled and consistent Wolde-ab, who used to identify himself with "Our Mother, Ethiopia, and Our Father, the *Negus* [Haile Selassie]"¹²⁶ shifted to the musings of the current rational actors. Wolde-ab (1908-1995), who was revered for two generations, finally succumbed to the themes and logic of the current political entrepreneurs:

The evidence that shows Eritrea had been a different entity from Ethiopia is the intrigue made between Menelik and the Italians. A very dirty intrigue! Menelik did not see Eritrea as part of his country; and that was why he was sending messages to the Italians asking them to take it over. It was the wish of the government of Shoa that Italy seize Eritrea. Had Eritrea been their land, how could they involve themselves in an intrigue with the Italians to sell it for 500 guns and 2000 Francs.¹²⁸ The money and firearms were received by *Ra'esi* Mekonnen [father of Emperor Haile Selassie]. You do not sell your land! You do not sell your country! If Eritrea was theirs, why did they sell it?¹²⁷

Pursuant with the act of negation, the EPLF portrayed Yohannes and Alula as foreign aggressors who ravaged Eritrea¹²⁹ and tried to make heroes out of the chiefs who collaborated with the Italians and the Egyptians. The sole criterion for heroism became conflict of any nature with the Tigrayans, regardless of how much they abused the *Kebessa* and cooperated with foreign aggressors. This was a way of countering the threat to the invention of an Eritrean distinct identity which came from Tigray, with whom the *Kebessa* shared a single pre-colonial trans-Mereb identity.

The symbols and myths that elites constructed were far-fetched and clearly contradicted what the *Kebessa* people perceive as facts. People were put on the spot, made to choose between the tradition of their forefathers (the primordial history) and what their offspring came up with (the invented history). They trust their forefathers more than their offspring because "the grandparents come to serve as a symbol of continuity, offering an anchor for the sense of ethnic identity."¹³⁰

Given the integrated and indivisible nature of the pre-colonial history of trans-Mereb Tigray, it was not so easy for Eritrean elites to summon distinct historical events. Delving into the past and browsing history did not pay off. They could not discover a cognitive framework for their diverse peoples. Culture- and history-based vernacular mobilization was not possible. For instance, invoking Gundet, Gura and Dogali as "historical sites where Eritreans shed their precious blood to successfully maintain their independence,"¹³¹ could hardly be appealing to the people who know who fought where, why and against whom from documents and orally transmitted history. Thus the assault on the history that exists in the minds of civilians or even inventing what did not exist in their memory was not particularly effective. This bold attempt to change history is most conspicuous in redefining heroes and villains.

By entering the past the EPLF was searching for epic legends serviceable in the present, much like those found in the Finnish *Kalevala*, a book of Finnish folk poems published in 1835. The *Kalevala* is a collection of heroic tales of mythic Finnish forefathers in the "pristine" past. The stories embodied in the poems inspired people to struggle against Swedish cultural

domination and emerging Russian political influence. This national epic raised the Finnish national consciousness.¹³²

Resurrecting the past, thus, had its drawbacks for Eritrean political elites who could not come up with a "*Kalevala*," which could reflect real or imagined distinct greatness. The undisputed epic legends they could find were those of the Queen of Sheba, Michael Suhul, Yohannes IV, *Ra'esi* Alula, etc.,—none of which were serviceable for their present goals.

By voting themselves out of the trans-Mereb identity, the Eritrean political actors threw the baby out with the bath water, disavowing the rich trans-Mereb ethno-history along with the personalities who deserve "heroic" stature. This was taken as a necessary step to claiming a distinct identity for Eritrea and its "colonial" occupation by Ethiopia. By so doing, they deprived themselves of historical heroes, and they became bogged down in the process of inventing their own distinct history. Sometimes, forgetting the old became a prerequisite for inventing the new. When remembering the old became necessary, it was only done selectively and in distorted fashion. Stubborn historical facts were altered—vilifying genuine "heroes" and elevating wicked villains to heroism. What is fondly remembered as a golden era by the people was presented as a dark age by political elites.

Browsing through history could, thus, produce names such as that of Woldemichael Solomon ("Gomida") whom the nationalists took pains to elevate to heroic status.¹³³ What they were trying to do was to emulate other African nationalists—select the chiefs who resisted the onset of colonialism. However, Woldemichael was neither a Mahdi nor a Mad Mullah. Paradoxically, the success of the political entrepreneurs in rewriting history is in the fact that they managed to dilute the hatred people used to have towards Woldemichael in the prearmed struggle era.

Bahta Hagos was also transformed into a hero not only for his rebellion against the Italians, but also for his differences against Yohannes IV. However, not all of those who rebelled were elevated to heroism. As discussed earlier, *Ra'esi* Araya Dimtsu and Debbab Araya, close relatives of the emperor, were influential figures in Akele Guzai. Particularly Debbab was widely accepted throughout what became "Eritrea." Yet, the

fact that he was from south of the Mereb disqualified him from becoming a "hero" during the armed struggle era.

The more recent period has also yielded some names such as *Ra'esi* Tessema Asberom and Idris Awate whom the political elites have tried to elevate to heroism. The former was

the first president of the Independence Bloc who could not be bribed and corrupted. He was always saddened by the Unionists who were being swayed by money and government positions. He was a great Eritrean nationalist.¹³⁴

He may have been a great Eritrean nationalist, but his "Eritrea" was not north of the Mereb. It was north of Alewaha, i.e. Tigray-Tigrignie—a notion the EPLF disavows.

Idris Awate, too, is presented as "the unyielding" Eritrean patriot who challenged the foreign occupiers of Britain and Ethiopia. Today in independent Eritrea, posters showing him as the "avant garde revolutionary" are everywhere:

While fighting the British, Awate defended the people. He used to hunt down bandits in defence of the public. He used to severely punish the bandits he captured, forcing them to return the property they took to the rightful owners. He was so popular that he was regarded as a patriot in Barka where women used to sing for him. Approached by the ELF, he openly announced the beginning of the armed struggle.¹³⁵

Even the above description depicts a Robin Hood-type of "social bandit" rather than a revolutionary. For Wolde-ab, Awate was

a bandit living on banditry ... The ELF approached him hoping he would and could help them. So they made him a leader of the first group of combatants ... Otherwise, he had no political goals, nor did he go to the field for political reasons.¹³⁶

Thus for most of his wild jungle life, Awate, just like the Robin Hood-type rebels in China¹³⁷ and Mexico,¹³⁸ could only envisage local agenda with concrete and immediate goals.

By constructing heroes and disavowing the rich trans-Mereb ethno-history, the EPLF was in effect saying "We must have our own history," a history with which it could formulate an ideology that would justify its aspirations. As such, it was marching against the current tides of nationalism which seek congruency for ethnic and political boundaries.¹³⁹ This desire of rational political actors to separate was a post-1960 phenomenon as Paul Henze summarized:

... Why should Bangui and Bujumbra become capitals with foreign embassies, let alone Ougadougou, Kigali, and Nouakchott, while cosmopolitan Asmara remains a provincial backwater? Why shouldn't educated Eritreans become ministers and ambassadors and go to the United Nations and take part in international meetings? These are retrospective resentments, however, for such heady prospects were not on the horizon at the time of the Eritrean settlement ...¹⁴⁰

In sum, history plays the chief symbolic role in identity formation and it has been the main forger of cohesion during political struggles. The emotion that legitimate political and economic grievances cannot generate, history can. Yet, a "heroic" past can easily be summoned up for mobilization only when it is not too far from a people's memory. That is precisely what makes nationalism chameleon-like, taking its color from its surroundings.¹⁴¹ As much as possible, it must "present a vivid archaeologically faithful and comprehensive record of the nation from the dawn of its existence."¹⁴² Verifiable past, as Renan observed, becomes a solid basis for the construction of a communal sense of identity: "*Un passe heroique, des grands hommes, de la gloire (j'entends de la veritable), voila le capital social sur lequel on assied une idee nationale.*"¹⁴³ Otherwise, the summoning of the past as a means of constructing a sense of group identity can have a rocky path ahead of it.

The resourcefulness of the Tigrayan elites and the resources of Tigray's past meshed to give the TPLF a comfortable mass base. By identifying themselves with the history of neglect and oppression and the "golden" past of their people, the Tigrayan elites found the ethnic card handy. Otherwise, before 1975, many of them had not been into romantic Tigrayan cultural renaissance. In fact, none of the interviewees, in my survey, had ever read or written anything in Tigrinya prior to joining the armed struggle.

Peasants who have concrete goals and elites who have abstract ideas are two unfamiliar social forces. "Self-determination" and "hegemony" were abstract concepts for peasants. Yet through the medium of ethnicity, the peasantry served as the most propitious base for the malcontented Tigrayan rational political actors.

Eritrean political actors, on the other hand, did not find ethno-history, which helped their Tigrayan counterparts to take power, serviceable. Thus, they got busy distorting the existing primordial history and inventing a new one. By assaulting the primordial past, however, the EPLF failed to create the type of "culture of resistance" the TPLF did. As a result, the latter had a relatively easier time mobilizing the masses than the former. In the 1980s, for instance, the EPLF had to conscript while the TPLF did not need to. Yet, in both cases success would have been seriously limited had the state pursued a prudent war policy.

Genocide-like Violence, Ethno-Regional Wars and History's Diminished Role

The heat of war contributed to the creation of a collective sense of identity, particularly as the EPLF and TPLF gained great victories against the strongest army in black Africa. Victories were escorted by propaganda which was an effective weapon of warfare, crystallizing the "us and them" distinction.

More polarization took place when the state pursued a genocidal-like policy, which was rationally instrumental.¹⁴⁴ With the motto of "Everything to the war front," the *Dergue* ruthlessly applied its doctrine of total war against the Eritrean and

Tigrayan civilians without any inkling of the most basic laws of war. Napalm, cluster bombs and other types of mass destructive weapons were used to murder innocent citizens. The twin weapons of mass destruction—famine and “resettlement”—were also assiduously applied in Tigray, showing to what extent human beings can be “*Homo hostilis*, the hostile species, the enemy-making animal.”¹⁴⁵

Such systematic and coordinated destruction of civilians earns states the genocidal appellation.¹⁴⁶ Essentially what the *Dergue* was entertaining was a vision similar to Hitler’s belief that “‘Germanization’ can only be carried out with the ‘soil’ and never with ‘men’.”¹⁴⁷ “We need the land, not the people” was the catch phrase of its cadres. The different ethnies were expected to simmer and evaporate in the Christian Amhara melting pot. This was the case during Haile Selassie’s reign too:

Today those who do not accept Ethiopia’s Eritrean-ness and Eritrea’s Ethiopian-ness and those who say that their language, kinfolk and masters are others, have left the land [Eritrea]. And others can continue to leave tomorrow. Otherwise, it must be known that the [Eritrean] territory will never cease to be Ethiopian and will never be dismembered from Ethiopia.¹⁴⁸

Just as Hitler needed a “Jewish world conspiracy” to legitimize his ideology of mass murder, Mengistu needed the “Tigray-Tigrignie conspiracy” for his imprudent war policy: “The EPLF interests are not limited to Eritrea. With the support of the TPLF, it is to create a Tigray-Tigrignie national state.”¹⁴⁹ By giving this kind of public speech, Mengistu tried to create in the Amhara a collective paranoia. Pursuant with this policy, Mengistu’s troops, who marched to the slogan “Forward with the Revolutionary Leadership of Comrade Mengistu Hailemariam,” treated Eritrean and Tigrayan civilians as “enemies.” The troops, who were trained to embody the interests of Ethiopia with those of Mengistu, faithfully implemented the regime’s master plans for carnage.

This ordeal, however, was quite "un-Ethiopian." During combat, the "Abyssinian soldiery are of lawless conduct, and the custom of the country makes might right."¹⁵⁰ Yet, victimizing innocent people of the magnitude seen in the *Dergue* era is unheard of. Even in the 19th century, this was not how war was fought:

Though I have heard of some acts of cruelty, the Abyssinians cannot be regarded as a cruel people ... Even during the ravages of war, they are rarely disposed to slay an enemy, when he can be taken prisoner; and when they see the scales of victory rising in their favor, they are far more inclined to spare their foes who are still defending themselves with resolution and bravery, than to wreak their vengeance in unmerciful butchery ...¹⁵¹

Being such an unusual tragedy, it was not that easy for people to find explanations for the savagery that had befallen them. They did not know what the state expected of them. Just as the Great Famine of 1889-92 was considered "an act of God,"¹⁵² so was the tragedy that plagued the region in the 1980s. "Because of our sins," was how one elder explained the ordeal. "We sinned and brought civil war on ourselves. War disrupts everything."¹⁵³

When the regime finally targeted its own committed Tigrayan servants such as Tadesse Gebreigziabher and was contemplating victimizing Fisseha Desta, the third-ranking *Dergue* member, it certainly knew its victims were not guilty as charged. What it was murdering were not "human beings," not ideological deviants. It was only uprooting their Tigrayan identity, an identity it felt was polluting its Amhara-dominated society. This can be illustrated by the absurdity of the nature of the interrogations. During torture and interrogation, one Tigrayan *Dergue* cadre from Adigrat, for instance, was ordered to reveal the amount of money the CIA was funnelling to him through Saudi Arabia.¹⁵⁴ Another innocent victim with a Tigrayan father and an Indian mother was told to reveal during interrogation how much the late Indira Gandhi used to contribute to the TPLF.¹⁵⁵

The Role of Bystanders: Genocidal-like violence is sensitive to the attitudes of bystanders, those that are neither victims nor perpetrators. Their support, opposition or indifference maps out the contours of events. The Amhara of Ethiopia, who make up the largest middle class, remained silent on the starvation, deportations and massacres of fellow citizens in Eritrea and Tigray. At best, they turned a deaf ear, and at worst, they supported the atrocities of the state. Silence does express fear, but it may also express acceptance and complicity.

In fact, there was a conscious avoidance of information, what Staub calls "motivated misperception."¹⁵⁶ "Motivated misperceptions" prevented them from expressing slight abhorrence against the state - abhorrence that is instinctual even to animals: "A dog will bark if another dog be shot in its presence."¹⁵⁷ The most absurd excuse given by many Amhara elites was that anything is permitted during war. However, "war does not excuse genocide."¹⁵⁸ Mengistu felt he had the go-ahead from the country's most formidable social group for his mass violence in Eritrea and Tigray, just as Hitler saw the lack of public outcry against the persecution of Jews as endorsement.¹⁵⁹

The *Dergue* propaganda against Eritreans and Tigrayans may have effectively produced a "consensual paranoia"¹⁶⁰ among the Amhara. It was necessary for the state to neutralize a good section of the population. Just as the Armenians were perceived as a threat to "a pure national identity and a return to past greatness" in Turkey, and the Jews were perceived as a threat to racial purity in Germany,¹⁶¹ the Eritreans and Tigrayans were perceived as spoilers of Ethiopia's unity and progress. The regime presented them as foreign agents who were conspiring with "reactionary Arab countries" to bring about the country's break-up. This myth, along with the fantasy of the "Tigray-Tigrignie conspiracy" quietened bystanders at best and favored the murderous regime. All Eritreans and Tigrayans in Ethiopia were suspected of conspiracy.

Atavistic hatreds may have fuelled the "consensual paranoia" of the Amhara bystanders. Just as in Burundi, where the Hutu could summon up events from the past to exclude the Tutsi,¹⁶² ancient hatreds may have prevented the Amhara bystanders from lending sympathy to the innocent Eritrean and

Tigrayan victims: "Tribalism, in short, is the age-old monster that suddenly rears its heads from the mists of time to spread violence and bloodshed."¹⁶³

The cruel state behavior gave the masses a sense of being targeted simply because they happened to be Eritreans and Tigrayans—making the conflicts "identity-driven."¹⁶⁴ Thus, Eritreans and Tigrayans of financial and intellectual substance, living all over Ethiopia, were subjected to what Lemarchand calls "selective genocide."¹⁶⁵ Dubbed "internal patriots" by the Minister of Security, Tesfaye Woldeselassie, Eritrean and Tigrayan elites, as in other genocidal societies such as Turkish Armenia, became victims of the "stab-in-the-back legend."¹⁶⁶ This hunting of intellectuals and businessmen was designed to deny the targeted peoples spiritual and moral leadership.¹⁶⁷ Then, *amharanization*, massacres and deportations could be carried out smoothly. This made the hitherto unfamiliar Maoist dictum of "draining the sea to kill the fish" a household expression.

Towards the end of the armed struggle, it was a matter of survival for the people to support the insurgents: "Rebels claim all manners of injustices; it is the actions of government that add or subtract the plausibility of such claims."¹⁶⁸ Thus, it became instinctual to identify with the EPLF and TPLF, "just as certain animals, merely upon being touched, automatically use their protective and aggressive apparatus."¹⁶⁹

Not surprisingly, the skillful Tigrayan rational actors called their campaigns against the 40,000-large *Dergue* army in Shire in 1988 and 1989 "Operation Hauzien"—invoking the 1988 Hauzien massacre, the worst massacre the state committed. Such massacres make survival the salient goal for every member of a community.¹⁷⁰ At this point, the people did not even care to know the political agendas of the Fronts with whom they allied. For some Tigrayans who could not understand the notion and term of secession, the objective of the TPLF was explained as: "The *Dergue* started its rule by killing Tigrayans, so we felt the TPLF program was to get rid of the *Dergue*."¹⁷¹ For others "Tigrayan liberation" meant "freedom from the killings and dictatorial rule of the *Dergue*. When the *Dergue* started

killing, we wished 'our children' the best of luck and we heartily supported them."¹⁷²

This was how a state, which failed to learn from history that genocide seldom wins a war, completely alienated the people and propelled the Tigrayan rational political actors into the saddle of power. The same behavior helped to lessen the ages-old conflict between the *Kebessa* Christians and the *Metahit* Muslims in Eritrea because "even the bitterest enmities do not prevent an association if this association is directed against a common enemy."¹⁷³ It paved the path for Eritrea's separation from Ethiopia, one of the rarest victories of a minority over a majority.

In conclusion, the summoning of pertinent primordial past, which is the principal shaper of identity, helped elites immensely in the process of mobilizing the peasantry. However, it was the actions of the genocidal-like state that completely alienated the peasantry, bringing vital support to the Eritrean and Tigrayan rational political actors.

Notes

1. Kolmodin, [1912]1915, Par. 1"¹⁴ K. W. Appelberg, [1912] 1915, par. 1:14.
2. Isaacs, 1989. p. 116.
3. Armstrong, 1982. 16.
4. Trevaskis Papers. p. 1.
5. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*. p. 65.
6. Stephen Longrigg to Chief Civil Affairs Officer, August 12, 1943. War Office 230-168.
7. Ullendorff, 1968. p. 135.
8. Trevaskis Papers, pp. 89-96.
9. Erlich, 1982. p. 1.
10. Longrigg, 1945. p. 81.
11. Samuel Gobat, *Journal of Three Years Residence in Abyssinia*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1851. p. 461.
12. G.F.H. Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik*. London: Constable and Co., [1902] 1935. p. 13.

13. Wylde, 1901. p. 20.
14. Cited in Wylde, 1901. p. 27. On the Americans who had fought for the Confederate army in their country and were then serving the Egyptian army, see the work of one of them: William Dye, 1880. p. 165; see also Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 13.
15. Wylde, 1901. p. 35.
16. Cited in Erlich, 1986. p. 36. See also Berkeley, [1902] 1935. pp. 134, 205, 279, 340, 363.
17. Cited in Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 340.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
19. Wylde, 1901. p. 29.
20. Cited in Erlich, 1982. pp. 24-25.
21. Winstanley, [1881] 1969. p. 254.
22. *Ibid.* p. 191.
23. Wylde, 1901. p. 149.
24. Winstanley, [1881] 1969. p. 225.
25. Gerald Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia*. London: Edward Arnold, 1892. For example, see pp. 61, 72, 74, 77.
26. Wylde, 1901. p. 29.
27. Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 29.
28. Longrigg, 1946. p. 121.
29. Longrigg, 1945. p. 112; Erlich, 1982. p. 81.
30. Erlich, 1982. p. 84.
31. *Ibid.* p. 83.
32. Wylde, 1901. p. 35.
33. Kolmodin, [1912] 1915. par. 209.
34. Dye, 1880. p. 283; see also Winstanley, [1881] 1969. p. 213; Wylde, 1901. p. 30.
35. Winstanley, [1881] 1935. p. 213.
36. Wylde, 1901. p. 28.
37. Richard Caulk, "'Black Snake, White Snake': Bahta Hagos and his revolt against Italian overrule in Eritrea, 1894," in Donald Crummey ed. *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, London: Portsmouth, 1986. p. 296.
38. Trevaskis Papers, p. 71.
39. *Ibid.* p. 58.
40. Dye, 1880. p. 285. For similar descriptions see Longrigg, 1945. pp. 101, 111; Wylde, 1901, p. 30.
41. Longrigg, 1945. p. 111.

42. Dye, 1880. pp. 285-6.
43. Trevaskis Papers, p. 71.
44. Winstanley, [1881] 1935. p. 244.
45. Cited in Erlich, 1982. p. 24.
46. Longrigg, 1945. p. 101.
47. Wylde, 1901. pp. 29-30.
48. Trevaskis Papers, p. 72.
49. Wylde, 1901. pp. 21-22.
50. Caulk, 1986. p. 300.
51. Trevaskis Papers, p. 73.
52. Erlich, 1982. pp. 35, 53.
53. Erlich, 1986. p. 32. Caulk, 1986. p. 297.
54. Caulk, 1986. p. 295.
55. Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 64.
56. This dictum, generally attributed to Bahta Hagos, was actually a refrain of a song which expressed a general fear and hatred of white men all over Ethiopia from Shoa to the *Kebraska*. According to the *Memoire d'Africa* of the former Italian governor of Eritrea, General Baratieri, the refrain said: "Of a black snake's bite you may be cured, but from a bite of a white snake you will never recover." Cited in Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 61.
57. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, EPLF, Orola. August 31, 1987.
58. Longrigg, 1945. pp. 123-26.
59. Anthony Smith, "Ethnic persistence and national transformation," in *The Journal of Sociology*. XXXV, No. 3. 1984. p. 457.
60. Cited in Erlich, 1986. p. 42.
61. Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 5.
62. *Ibid.* p. 21.
63. Kolmodin, [1912] 1935. par. 286.
64. Ernest Work, *Ethiopia: A Pawn in European Diplomacy*. New Concord, 1935. p. 100.
65. Smith, "War and Ethnicity ..." p. 78.
66. Work, 1935. p. 136; see also Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 37.
67. Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 18.
68. On the 1943 *Weyane*, see Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
69. Letter from the U.S. Legation in Addis Ababa to State Depart-

- ment in Washington D.C. on the "Request of Ethiopian Government for Airplanes and Army Equipment, and Its Connection with Unrest in Northern Ethiopia." September 29, 1943.
70. Pankhurst, 1953. pp. 22-23.
 71. Abboy Mehari, *Weyin*. September 1993 (*Pagumien* 1985 Ethiopian Calendar). Special Issue. p. 4.
 72. *Shaq* Hadgu Debessai (76) in the T.V. program of "Ye qadamay Weyane ye tegel tarik," LRR-554 A-B August 1993 (*Nehassie* 1985).
 73. Young, 1976. pp. 129-30.
 74. Smith, 1991. pp. 63-69.
 75. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. p. 53.
 76. Smith, 1991. p. 17.
 77. Hammond, 1989. p. 15.
 78. *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray*. April 8, 1989 (*Miazia* 1 1981).
 79. *Hezbawi Democracyawi Program*. Adopted during TPLF's Second Congress, May 1983. p. 6.
 80. *Manifesto of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)* February 1976. pp. V-VI.
 81. Cited in Alexander Benningsen, "Soviet Minority Nationalism in Historical Perspective," in Robert Conquest ed. *The Last Empire*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986. p. 131.
 82. This was one of many folk poems with nationalist meaning that the TPLF collected from the countryside. Just as the messages encoded in the folk poems of the *Kalevala* have inspired Finnish nationalism, this folk poem, *inter alia*, was intended to inspire Tigrayan ethnic nationalism. It was aired in *Dimtsi Weyane Tigray* on Thursday November 17 1982 (*Hedar* 9 1975).
 83. *En fait de souvenirs nationaux, les deuils valent mieux que les triomphes; car ils imposent des devoirs; ils commandent l'effort en commun*. Renan, 1882. p. 27.
 84. Breuilly, 1982. pp. 345-46; Baton, 1983. p. 213; Horowitz, 1991. p. 10.
 85. *Hezbawi Democracyawi ...* pp. 21-22.
 86. *Weyin*, August 1989.
 87. Gebru Tareke, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Peasant Mobilization: the Cases of Bale and Tigray," in Marina Ottaway, ed. *The Political Economy of Ethiopia*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990. p. 151.

88. Interview: Eyasu Berhe (38), Head of the Cultural Department of the EPRDF, March 11, 1994. Addis Ababa.
89. Isaacs, 1989. p. 74.
90. Emerson, 1960. p. 92.
91. Elie Kedourie, "Introduction," in *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*. Elie Kedourie, ed. London: Frank Cass, 1970. p. 30.
92. Crawford Young, "Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Class in Africa: A Retrospective," in *Cahiers d'etudes Africaines*. Vol. XXVI (3) 103, 1986. p. 432.
93. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Tradition," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
94. Gebru Tareke, 1990. p. 146.
95. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*. pp. 142-3.
96. *Weyin*, August, 1975. p. 6.
97. *Manifesto of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)*. pp. 11-12, 22-25.
98. *The Constitution of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)*. Adopted at the Second Organizational Congress of the TPLF. May 1983. p. 4.
99. *Qalsi Hezbi Ertra, Kabey Nabey (Gemgam)*. TPLF. April 1985 (*Miazia* 1978). p. 80.
100. *Yetegil Teri*. Vol. 2, # 4. December-January 1986 (*Tahsas-Ter* 1978). pp. 79 & 85.
101. *Ibid*. pp. 84-85.
102. *Yetegil Teri*. July-August 1986 (*Hamle-Nehasie* 1978). pp. 6-9.
103. *Weyin*. November 9 1990 (*Teqmti* 30 1983). pp. 2-3.
104. "Editorial," *Weyin*. June-July 1989 (*Sene/Hamle* 1981). p. 4.
105. Interview: Sebhat Negga (58), Executive Committee member of the EPRDF, February 27, 1994. Addis Ababa. According to Abebe Tessema, the founder of *Bahli Tigray* and a TPLF combatant until 1979, Sebhat Negga, had infact entertained Tigrayan independence as a political goal.
106. Hechter, 1986. p. 364. Brass, 1991. pp. 46-47.
107. Breuilly, 1982; Brass, 1991.
108. Nairn, p. 101.
109. Isaacs, 1989. p. 121.
110. Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy*. New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984. p. XIII.

111. Seton-Watson, 1986. p. 25.
112. Interview: *Haleqa* Gebrehiwet Woldeabzgi (52), May 8, 1994. Axum.
113. *Yetsere Hezbotch Enqeseqasie ...* pp. 215-220. Emphasis in the original.
114. *Ye Etopia Yewunbedena ...* p. 43.
115. Interview: *Abba* Yisaaq Gebreyesus.
116. President Mengistu Hailemariam's speech, in *Addis Zemen*. October 19, 1990. p. 5.
117. Gurr, 1970. p. 211.
118. Interview: Mulu Hagos (40), EPRDF Finance Officer. March 12, 1994. Addis Ababa.
119. Gebru Tareke, 1990. p. 151.
120. *Weyin*. June/July 1989 (*Sene/Hamle*). P. 1.
121. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*. p. 68.
122. Quoted in Pankhurst, 1953. p. 33.
123. "A Short Historical Background of Eritrea," *Peoples Liberation Forces of the ELF*. n.d. p. 1.
124. *Vanguard*. April 1977. p. 12.
125. *Ertra'n Qalsan*. January 1987. pp. 56-57.
126. *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. March 14, 1946. p. 4.
127. For his acquiescence to the seizure of Eritrea, Menelik was rewarded with a loan of 150,000 pound (4,000,000 lire). Berkeley, [1902] 1935. p. 2.
128. Interview: Wolde-ab Woldemariam, EPLF, Orot, August 31 1987.
129. *Ertra'n Qalsa'n*. January 1987. p. 26.
130. Epstein, 1978. p. 148.
131. *Ertra'n Qalsa'n*. January 1987. p. 26.
132. Michael Branch, "Kalevala: From Myth to Symbol," *Books from Finland*. Vol. XIX # 1, 1985. p. 1; Tracy Karner, "Ideology and Nationalism: the Finnish Move to Independence, 1809-1918," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Vol. 14, # 2. 1991. pp. 152-4.
133. *Ertra'n Qalsa'n*. January 1987. pp. 33-37.
134. *Sagem*. April 1988. p. 29.
135. *Sagem*. August 1988. p. 2; and September 1990. p. 21.
136. Interview: Wolde-ab Waldemarian. EPLF. Orot, 1987.
137. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. p. 114.

138. George Rude, *Ideology and Popular Protest*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. p. 74.
139. Gellner, 1983. p. 1.
140. Paul Henze, "Eritrea," in Michael Radu ed., *The New Insurgencies: Anticomunist Guerrillas in the Third World*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990. p. 99.
141. Smith, 1991. p. 79.
142. Smith, 1988. p. 13.
143. Renan, 1882. p. 26; see also Smith, *The Ethnic Revival*. p. 8.
144. Lepsius, 1897. pp. 34-35; Morgenthau, 1918. p. 323; Fein, 1979. p. 8; Kuper, 1981. p. 50; Robert Melson, "Revolution and Genocide: On the Causes of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust," in Richard G. Hovannisian ed. *The Armenian Genocide*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. p. 82.
145. Keen, 1986. p. 10.
146. Lemkin, 1973. pp. 79, 92; I. Horowitz, 1980. p. 35.
147. Adolf Hitler, in Lemkin, 1973. p. 81.
148. Asrate Kassa, [Governor of Eritrea:1964-1970], in Mamo Wudneh, *Ye Ertra Tarik*. Asmara: Kokeb Tsibah Press, 1969. Inside of the cover page.
149. President Mengistu Hailemariam, WPE Polit. Bureau Regular 100th Meeting, Part II. May 9-10 1989 [*Genbot* 1-2 1981]. p. 2.
150. Winstanley, [1881] 1935. p. 256.
151. Gobat, 1851. p. 463.
152. Richard Pankhurst, *The History of Famine and Epidemics in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 1985. p. 57.
153. Cited in Tewolde Berhan Gebre-Igziabher, "Fields of Memory," in *New Internationalist*. # 267. May 1995. p. 13.
154. Interview: by Dimtsi Weyane. July 6, 1986 [*Hamle* 29 1978].
155. Tamrat Woldegabriel, Personal communication, Washington D.C. November 8, 1993.
156. *Ibid.* pp. 13, 20-21, 87.
157. Lepsius, 1897. p. 218.
158. Jean Zeiler, "Genocide Convention-Intentional Starvation- Ethiopian Famine in the Eritrean War for Independence ...," in the *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law*. Vol. 19, # 3. 1989. p. 606.
159. Staub, 1993. p. 87.

160. Keen, 1986. p. 19.
161. Staub, 1993. p. 23.
162. Lemarchand, 1990. p. 89. I was in Addis Ababa in the mid 1980s, at the height of the deportations, and heard a prominent historian at Addis Ababa University arguing why the "resettlement" was a right course of action. Another faculty member, an engineer, of the same university who happened to be in U.C. Berkeley as a Fulbright scholar also supported the deportations. Both Amhara "bystanders" supported the deportations, presumably, because of historical enmity they had with the Tigrayans.
163. Lemarchand, 1994. p. 3.
164. Elizabeth Crighton and Martha Abele MacIver, 1991. "The Evolution of Protracted Ethnic Conflict: Group Dominance and Political Underdevelopment in Northern Ireland and Lebanon," *Comparative Politics*. Vol. 23, # 2. 1991. p. 127; see also Edward Spicer, "Persistent Cultural Systems," *Science*. Vol. 174. 1979. p. 797.
165. Lemarchand, 1991. p. 94.
166. Fein, 1979. p. 17.
167. Morgenthau, 1918. pp. 326-27; Lemkin, 1973. p. XI; Kuper, 1986. p. 47.
168. Pye, 1964. 168.
169. Simmel, 1955. p. 29.
170. Crighton and MacIver, 1991. p. 129.
171. Interview: Abera Giday (66). May 5, 1994. Axum.
172. Interview: Sheik Abdelnur Hassen (57), May 8, 1994. Axum.
173. Simmel, 1955. p. 103.

CONCLUSION



The Eritrean and Tigrayan case studies show that the tension between the primordial identity and instrumentally-shaped sense of identity gets diluted by state mass violence. This is shown by the success and failure of the three political actors—the EPLF, the TPLF and the *Dergue*—all of whom vied for a share of the political pie. Eyes on the prize, three of them pursued divergent instrumentalist discourses. The EPLF, which did not find the primordial past serviceable, assaulted it. The TPLF summoned and effectively used it. The *Dergue* pursued a policy of mass violence.

To say the primordial past has an important role in mobilization is not to gainsay the socially constructed nature of identity. On the contrary, it shows that the primordial past serves as a solid foundation for identity construction. Keeping in mind that the primordial past is not an indispensable condition for the social construction of identity, as observed in many colonial countries, it should also be underlined that the constructionist rational actors are not omnipotent. Where there is a formidable primordial past, they can summon it or ignore it but they cannot dismantle and replace it with their own invented “primordial past.” Their relative success and failure is influenc-

enced by the wealth and potency of the primordial grist for their nationalist mills.

A third variable, the genocidal-type state behavior, however, propels identity to the center stage regardless of the wealth and paucity of the primordial grist that makes up its foundations. Transforming ethno-regional nationalism into identity-driven conflict, genocidal-like violence engulfs entire populations in a survival dilemma. In Eritrea and Tigray, for instance, the *Dergue* used intentional starvation, politically motivated resettlement (in Tigray, although not Eritrea), mass killings such as at Hauzien and She'eb, conscription and hunting Tigrayan and Eritrean intellectuals, bureaucrats, technocrats and businessmen ("selective genocide").

Thus, it is not a single theory that explains the ethno-regional conflicts in Eritrea and Tigray. It is a synthesis of the primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives, along with the crucial addendum of the genocidal-like state as an exacerbator of conflict, that can explain nationalism in the region.

Until the 1960s, the *Kebessa* entertained no sense of identity other than the primordially-based trans-Mereb identity. Once Eritrea was linked with Ethiopia in 1952, the state ethnocidal policy of *amharanization* assaulted Eritrean particularities—the flag, trade unions, autonomy, a free press, language, culture, etc. Further, the state, even at a local level, became a source of competition among the Eritrean and the Amhara elites. This gave Eritrean elites a sense of subjugation to an alien rule; and the more they were exposed to Ethiopia, the more the socio-cultural boundaries with the Amhara became obvious. They began to entertain a feeling of being more "modernized" and a sense of being more developed than the Amhara because of their colonial experience.

These grievances led to the armed struggle in 1961. Despite immense outside backing—Arab (particularly until the 1967 Arab-Israeli War), Cuban, Chinese and East European support—the armed struggle was weakened by the absence of a distinct primordial identity. The ELF and EPLF assault on the primordial trans-Mereb identity and the launching of a process of inventing a brand new identity deprived them of a crucial anchor in the past. Consequently, the revolution kept lurch-

ing until the beginning of the ethnonationalist war in Tigray in 1975 which came close to verifying Trevaskis's 1960 prophetic forewarning against Ethiopia's undue interference in Eritrea's affairs:

Should there be discontent on the Eritrean Plateau it is likely to be echoed in the Tigray and to revive dreams of an Eritrean-Tigrayan union. Ethiopia would be unwise to risk such an eventuality.¹

As Trevaskis predicted, the nationalist virus that had been rampant in Eritrea for thirteen years by 1975 afflicted Tigray. However, what Trevaskis failed to see was that the musings of political elites change and they are not always primordially-determined; they could also be rationally shaped. The 1940s political actors imagined a *risorgimento* national state of Tigray-Tigrignie. The current political actors, on the other hand, disavowed the Tigray-Tigrignie identity and imagined their community north of the Mereb, the "modernized" Eritrea which used to be Italy's *La colonia primogenita*.

The current Tigrayan rational actors, too, imagined their community south of the Mereb, excluding Eritrea. Due to the energy generated by the primordial power of ethnicity, the Tigrayan insurgency mushroomed relatively suddenly. With the exception of the *Kebessa*, it started essentially as a *risorgimento* nationalism. Wolqait, Tselemti and Raya Qobo, Tigray's "Alsace and Lorraine," were reclaimed from neighboring Gondar and Wello administrative regions. The primordially-dictated Tigrayan insurgency, thus, emerged as a prodigious movement that enabled Eritreans to realize their otherwise impossible aspirations. Without the Tigrayan insurgency, the hurdles faced by the Eritrean nationalism were too formidable, as Fred Halliday had reckoned in 1971:

it is difficult to see how the Eritreans could ever inflict a definitive defeat on the Ethiopian army without a parallel anti-monarchic revolution inside Ethiopia itself. In that sense, the victory of the opposition inside Ethiopia

appears to be a strategic precondition for the liberation of Eritrea.²

The principal setback for the Eritrean rational actors was, however, the lack of primordial ties between their Christian and Muslim populations who were, according to Wolde-ab's 1971 Beirut press conference, strangers to one another. The formidability of this obstacle was, therefore, overcome by the emergence of two favorable conditions: the rise of the Tigrayan insurgency and the misguided state war policy.

As a custodian of primordial heritage, the Tigrayan insurgency soon became a major actor in the political climate of the region. The distinct primordial ethno-history that the Eritreans did not have, the Tigrayans had. The ethno-history that the Eritreans assaulted, the Tigrayans summoned. And heroizing the primordial ethno-history, which was instrumentally rational, was a major inflamer of the Tigrayan ethnic nationalism. Its sudden rise gave the Eritrean revolution (until then lurching for lack of a primordial anchor) a jump start.

Yet, mobilization did not always go well even in Tigray, as the peasantry, whose world in general ends in the village, could not grasp abstract concepts such as "hegemony," "secession," "nationalism," etc. At best, ethnic nationalism offered the Tigrayan elites only a comfortable staying power in the rural context. Otherwise, it was state genocidal-like behavior that heralded a turning point in the process of mobilization. It was the final seal Eritrean and Tigrayan political actors needed for unimpeded mobilization of the peasantry. Once the people were convinced that all the state was doing was "draining the sea to kill the fish," mobilization became a foregone conclusion. The state war policy narrowed the gap between civilian and elite senses of identity and carried them to victory.

Mobilization, therefore, preceded identification. Victory, too, came prior to identification, giving political actors a golden opportunity to construct identity the way they saw it. Such opportunities are rarely missed by rational actors who magically metamorphose them into a natural and logical course of events. Thus, it was the state violence that propelled Eritrean elites to a separatist victory and they created Eritrea. Now in the late

1990s they need to create Eritreans and nurture Eritrean-ness. Conceived in reaction to genocidal-like state behavior, Eritrean-ness remains yet to be delivered. In essence, what the rational actors are doing now is what an Italian nationalist, Massimo d'Azeglio, once said: "We have made Italy, now we must make Italians."³

"Making Eritreans" and nurturing "Eritrean-ness" demands self-definition and boundary delimitation, since identity is inherently contrastive and needs the relevant other. Making the Amhara the relevant other was not difficult due to their socio-cultural differences with Eritreans and the genocidal-like behavior of the state they dominated. Once the Amhara hegemony is gone, marking the boundary with Tigray appeared a necessary step.

Transforming Tigrayans into the relevant other, however, has not been that easy. Now the assault on the trans-Mereb ethno-history, which pervaded the armed struggle era, is superfluous, it has been replaced by ethno-historic amnesia. Instead, the search is for what Fredrik Barth calls "border guards" to separate Eritreans from Tigrayans as effectively as traffic lights would. The first step taken in this process was to give the *Kebessa* a name other than "Tigrayan." They are named "Tigrinya" after the name of their language, as if in a separate name lies the ultimate seal of a distinct identity. One political leader justified its adoption:

When one talks about ethnicity/nationality, there is no question in many people's mind, at least in my mind, that we all are Tigrayans ... [But] Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans do not call themselves Tigrayans; a few may do.⁴

In my survey, civilians have not internalized the new name. One third (35.7%) call themselves just "*Kebessa*" while another third (32.1%) said the name should have been "Tigrayan." The other third (32.1%) use the new name but half of them say it includes Tigrayans while the other half say it excludes Tigrayans. The oldest of my informants, said "It ['Tigrinya']

has no meaning. Hamasien, Seraye and Akele Guzai have been separate entities."⁵

Only one of the elite informants rejects the new name:

'Nya' [the very sound] did not exist in our language. It is a sound and a grammatical conjugation that has intruded from Amarinya into our language. The language we speak is known as *Lisane Habesha* [the language of the *Habesha*] or *Lisane Tigray* [the language of the Tigray]. The people who speak the language should be known as Tigrayans or *Habesha*, not Tigrinya because, grammatically, it does not make sense.⁶

The confusion that lingers over whom "Tigrinya" includes and excludes is not limited to civilians. The political leadership themselves, in my survey, are evenly divided on the question. One of those who says it includes Tigrayans (46.6%), "A.B", said: "'Tigrinya' includes Tigrayans. It was not designed to mark a boundary between Tigrayans and the *Kebessa*. On the contrary, it was designed to bring the two closer." However, the other half of the elite informants (50%) agree with what the then Vice-Minister of Information and Culture, Ahmed Tahir Baduri, said: "'Tigrinya' was intended to distinguish the *Kebessa* from Tigrayans, just like the British and Americans have different names."

Name changing is not unusual. Negro was changed to Black in the U.S., and in South Africa Boer and Bantu have been readily replaced by Afrikaner and black because they had developed pejorative connotations. However, "Tigrayan" does not carry similar connotations and the adoption of "Tigrinya" was merely a political construction intended to slice an ethnic group into two halves and aspire to make them as mutually unfamiliar as possible. The invention of the term was designed to assault the psychological basis of the trans-Mereb sense of identity.

The adoption of the Gregorian calendar at the expense of the Julian calendar was another "border guard" meant to enhance the salience of the boundary between Tigray and the *Kebessa*. In my survey, civilians and elites stand poles apart on which calendar they use. All civilians use the Julian calendar.

One said, "My new year starts on September 11. Yohannes (John) the disciple, opened a new year. It is he who broke the news about the coming of Jesus."⁷ Another underlined the generational gap: "Our calendar is Ethiopian (Julian) and our new year begins on September 11. Our children use the Gregorian."⁸ A Muslim went further: "We [the Muslims] use the Hejira [Arab] calendar. But we understand and share the joy of our Christian brethren when they celebrate their new year on September 11. I do not feel anything for January 1. It is not mine."⁹ In the 1940s and 1950s, all the independent and government newspapers such as *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta* invariably used the Julian calendar. The editors were celebrating September 11 as "Our New Year."¹⁰

Further, the intense craving of Eritrean political elites to be different from Tigray can be illustrated by the split of the Eritrean Orthodox Church from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For the first time in the last 1,600 years, the Eritrean Church is securing the consecration of its own bishops directly from the Coptic Church of Egypt.¹¹ In the past, the Church had been the most important symbol of the trans-Mereb identity.

My survey was conducted in 1994 when the euphoria of victory had not subsided. Yet, just as the assault on history did not pay off during the armed struggle, the invention of "border guards" such as a new name for the *Kebessa* and the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in the post-victory era have not taken off among the people. It clearly demonstrates the strength of primordialism and the limitations of instrumentalism even in the aftermath of victory when the society is imbued with euphoria. This is not to gainsay the seeds of uniqueness, and the invented barriers that are quietly sown today may in the long run be permanent "border guards" between the *Kebessa* and Tigray. For now, though, as in the armed struggle era, it is the trans-Mereb ethno-history which defines the civilian collective uniqueness. As a source of perceptions and attitudes of a people, primordial ethno-history knows no international boundary.

Consequently, just as cultural assimilation does not necessarily entail psychological assimilation, cultural differentiation by consciously fabricating "border guards" need not result

in psychological differentiation, at least in the short term. Had the psychological differences existed, though, the coinage of a new name, the adoption of a new calendar, the disaffiliation of the church, etc., would have been instantly internalized "border guards" as effective as traffic lights - giving separate identity its proverbial potency. It is the duration of the separate lives and economic transformations that will ultimately generate separate senses of identity based on different psychological make-ups between the two halves of the trans-Mereb region. In other words, it is the emergence of new and separate primordial elements that can create fault lines within the current primordial trans-Mereb identity, transforming the Mereb River into a real "us" and "them" boundary.

Two major sources of a distinct primordial Eritrean identity have already been born. These are the two holidays which have nationalist meanings—Independence Day (May 24) and Martyrs' Day (June 20) both of which invoke immense emotions. The former is celebrated by two nights of partying (May 23 and 24) and the latter is celebrated by marches to different sites where major battles were fought and to the cemetery of the martyrs. In 1992 thousands marched to Mai Debinet. In 1993 many thousands of residents of Asmara marched to Adi Yaqob, 17 kilometers north of Asmara where in 1978 about 1,000 martyrs fell.¹² In 1994, 150,000 residents of Asmara marched to Adi Hawusha, 18 kilometers south of Asmara where the first tank was captured by the EPLF in 1977. The primordial significance of such sites is constantly voiced by the EPLF. Adi Hawusha, for instance, is regarded as "A sacred place where the blood of our brothers and sisters was shed, where their bones were shattered."¹³ At these sites marchers weep and cry as if their beloved martyrs were just being newly entombed. The sites and the occasions enhance national and collective imaginings.

In addition, Eritrea has chosen the camel to be the national insignia. An animal that had no societal and religious significance for the Christians, the camel symbolizes Eritrean endurance and perseverance. It was alien to the *Kebessa*, associated with the *Metahit* Muslim nomads. But its contribution in the armed struggle was so immense that now even the *Kebessa* accept it. More than anything else, though, the camel symbolizes

the youthful nature of the Eritrean identity that can only look towards the future, and not the past.

Yet, Eritrea may not find it that easy to completely turn its back on the past and Eritrean rational actors may wish they did not have a rich history because it is not serviceable to their claim of a distinct Eritrean identity. In effect, they seem to be repeating the maxim: "Happy are the people whose annals are blank in history books."¹⁴

As Eritreans established Africa's newest state, Tigrayans abandoned the quest for a separate political roof and took over the state apparatus of the whole of Ethiopia. The Tigrayan rational actors played the ethnic game effectively and harnessed the emotion it sparked to the seizure of power. The primordial ethno-history of Tigray was instrumental for their mission. The TPLF still uses the stele of Axum as its insignia. The cultural achievements of the Axumite Empire needed to be appropriated in order to glorify *Adi Abo*. Material remains of the Axumite civilization such as the stele of Axum dignified the Tigrayan *Adi Abo* through a magnificent antiquity, making its re-entry to a living past easy.

Therefore, the primordial ethno-history that was so instrumental in propelling Tigrayan rational political actors to power is still a potent factor in shaping identity. Furthermore, their two holidays aptly illustrate the interdependent nature of the primordial and instrumental aspects of identity. Unlike that of the Eritreans, one of the Tigrayan holidays is from the past and the other from the present: the 1943 primordial "First" *Weyane* and the 1975 instrumental "Second" *Weyane*.

For both Eritreans and Tigrayans, the primordial sense of collective martyrdom may be a source of identity consciousness. Invoking the numerous sites where the state committed massacres such as the "slaughter houses" of Hauzien and She'eb could have cataclysmic effects in reordering identities. No less important are events such as the 1985 trek made by a mass of people (estimated up to 200,000) to the Sudan, escaping death from famine and aerial bombardment. Such events can be potent forgers of Tigrayan collective identity.

Consequently, whereas nationalism created the Eritrean nation, it reawakened the Tigrayan identity. In Tigray, the raw

materials have been readily available, awaiting elites to feed them into their nationalist mills. Yet, this is not to gainsay the fluidity of nationalism which has nothing natural about it. Conceived in the minds of elites, the ultimate goal of nationalism may not be certain, as observed in Tigray where a shift from an ethnic nationalist agenda to a pan-Ethiopian agenda took place. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that ethnic nationalist movements would opt for separation, given the chance, the TPLF side-stepped secession and opted for the seat of power. And, after all is said and done, the exhortation is to "let bygones be bygones." This was what the TPLF leader, now Ethiopia's Prime Minister, urged his newest neighbors, the Eritreans, on the occasion of their first independence day:

I know you have wounds because I know your wounds either from nearby or from afar [and] because I know similar wounds exist on my back and on the back of my comrades. I will not ask you to forget the past. It is something that cannot be forgotten because it is educational. However, we should not scratch our wounds. You should not scratch your wounds. The worst is gone. The worst is buried.

We did not bury human beings [*Dergue*] alone. We have also buried ideologies and outlooks. We have buried hegemonic and chauvinistic outlooks, too. Therefore, we cannot forget the past so that it can teach us lessons; we remember our wounds so that we can learn from them; but we should not scratch them; we should not dwell on them. Let bygones be bygones. We have commenced a new chapter. In this new chapter, we will not build a wall at the Mereb.¹⁵

Just as the separation of Pakistan from India on religious basis and the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan on ethnic basis were rational choices, so were the decisions of the TPLF to shift from secession to the seizure of power and that of the EPLF to opt for a separate political roof, forms of rational choices.

Once in the seat of power in Addis Ababa, the ethnic card is being aborted at a fast rate to such an extent that even the

Tigrayan features of the regime are fading almost completely. A new national army with no ethnic character has been created. Except for the premiership and foreign ministry, all cabinet posts are held by non-Tigrayans. Even key posts such as defence, judiciary, and police are held by non-Tigrayans. In other words, the rational political actors led a costly ethnic nationalist war in Tigray without being ethnic nationalists themselves. For the Tigrayan rational actors, therefore, Marxism was their *raison d'être* and ethnic nationalism their means to an end. And ethnic nationalism was a politics of power.

The Eritrean and Tigrayan case studies show ethno-regional conflicts are not monocausal. And mobilization can take place prior to identification as long as the state pursued a genocidal-like war policy. Having a prior sense of collective identity is not a condition *sine qua non* for mobilization. Victory offers rational political actors a virtual carte blanche to invent identity. As a post-victory phenomenon, the invention of identity faces no formidable stumbling blocks, despite the rift in the civilian and elite identity perceptions. For instance, even when Eritrean elites take radical measures in the process of inventing identity such as the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, the response of civilians is "Our children use the Gregorian, we use the Julian calendar" — agreeing to disagree. As Ernest Renan observed, the endurance of this collective sense of belongingness is glued by the sacrifices the people made in the past and by what they are prepared to make in the future. With the past as a relevant background, therefore, what ultimately matters is the desire under which political roof to live: "*L'existence d'une nation est ... un plebiscite de tous les jours.*"¹⁶

Notes

1. Trevaskis, 1960. pp. 130-131.
2. Fred Halliday, "The Fighting in Eritrea," *New Left Review*, # 67 May/June 1971. p. 65.
3. Emerson, 1960. p. 95.
4. Interview: Alemseged Tesfai.
5. Interview: *Bashai* Gebreselassie Amanuel (94).
6. Interview: *Abba* Yisaaq Gebreyesus.

7. Interview: *Abba Tesfa Lidet*, July 15, 1994. Mendefera.
8. Interview: *Qeshi Giday*.
9. Interview: *Sheikh Mohammed Adem Kiyar*.
10. See, for example, *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*. September 13, 1945.
11. Haddis Gebremeskel, "Eritrea gets its first bishops despite Ethiopian opposition," *New African*. October 1994. No. 323.
12. *Haddas Ertra*. June 23, 1993. p. 2.
13. *Haddas Ertra*. June 22, 1944. p. 3; see also p. 8.
14. Quoted in Isaacs, 1989, p. 128.
15. *Haddas Ertra*. # 77. May 27, 1993, p. 4.
16. Renan, 1882. p. 27.

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IDENTITY JILTED

OR

RE-IMAGINING IDENTITY?

In this bold study of modern ethno-regional nationalism, the author examines the divergent paths taken by the nationalist insurgencies in Tigray and Eritrea. The author argues that Tigrayans, south of the Mereb River, and *Kebessa* (highlands) Eritreans, north of the Mereb, are ethnically one people, tied by common history, political economy, myth, language and religion. Both fought against a common enemy, an oppressive Amhara ethnic state, for a period of seventeen and thirty years respectively. In the process of the armed struggle, however, each evolved separate political identities and, after jointly marching to military victory in 1991, they followed separate political paths — Eritreans created the newest state in Africa and Tigrayans remained within the Ethiopian body politic.

The three rational actors in the region — The EPLF, TPLF and the *Dergue*, all of whom vied for a share of the political pie — pursued divergent policies. The author advances a highly plausible thesis to explain the *Re-Imagining of Identity*. Whenever available, as in Tigray, the primordial past serves as a solid foundation for the social construction of identity. To say that the primordial past has a center stage in an ethno-regional conflict is not to deny the socially constructed nature of identity. Nor does it imply that the primordial past is condition *sine qua non* for identity construction. However, mobilization was not absolutely rosy even in Tigray, because peasants could not conceptualize abstract terms such as "nationalism," "hegemony," "secession," "self-determination," etc. It was the Ethiopian state's genocidal-like policy that heralded a turning point in the process of mobilization. Once peasants were convinced that all that the state was doing was "draining the sea to kill the fish," mobilization became a foregone conclusion. Mobilization, thus, preceded identification. Victory, too, came prior to identification, giving political entrepreneurs a free hand to construct identity the way they saw fit.

Alemseged Abbay was educated at Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia) and the University of California at Berkeley. Currently, he is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute of International Studies at U.C. Berkeley.

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